



CHRISTINE  
STERLING

A GROOM  
*for*  
LAUREN

*the*  
BLIZZARD  
BRIDES  


*A Groom for  
Lauren*

THE BLIZZARD BRIDES #25



*Christine Sterling*

# A GROOM FOR LAUREN

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## A GROOM FOR LAUREN

A woman who must marry for appearances, a man who needs to marry to secure his future. Can a marriage of convenience be just what they need?

Lauren Hale lost everything she valued. Her high society home, her family, friends, and now her husband. Why did she ever think moving west to a small town like Last Chance was a good idea? Now, a widowed mother with a five-month-old, she is being pressured to remarry by the local pastor. What she doesn't expect is a handsome stranger to come to her rescue... *twice*.

Dr. Christopher Spaulding prefers animals to people. But he needs to find a wife and soon, otherwise he will lose his inheritance and the funds needed to open his own veterinary clinic. Hearing of a town where most of the women are widows, he pens a letter and heads west. The last thing he expects is to find the woman he corresponded with already married! When he rescues a young mother and her baby from the raging river outside of town, he thinks she might be the answer to his prayers.

Will Lauren learn to move from the mistakes of the past? Can Christopher accept her fragile heart?



## PROLOGUE



“Something’s wrong with Lauren,” Ruth Chambers mused as she folded the letter she received from her sister. “Something dreadful.”

Looking at her reflection in the mirror above the mantle, she noted her appearance. The sun-ripened hair of gold. The smooth, unblemished skin. The large, brown eyes and narrow nose. The rather cold, placid expression no man’s compliments could ever change into a smile.

Both Chambers sisters were known as Snow White and Rose Red in certain circles. It was a play on words that aptly described their personalities.

*Especially among the male constituents of Philadelphia’s high society.*

“Snow White may be quiet,” grumbled one rejected would-be suitor, “but once she opens her mouth, she’s a right harridan.”

Remembering that, the tiniest smile lifted the corner of Ruth’s lips. ‘Harridan’ was another word for a woman who did not believe it was a God-given right for a man to rule over a woman.

More reason why she had objected to Lauren’s decision to marry some worthless farmer and leave the life they’d always known in the city, the center of civilization, to travel to the...

She gave a shiver of disgust.

*The west.*

Glancing down at the letter again, Ruth knew Lauren was now regretting her decision. Maybe she always had for the past five years but had too much pride to say it. Among their set, most saw Ruth as the prideful one because she voiced her thoughts and ideas without concern for what others thought of it.

Lauren may not be as blunt, but she had the Chambers’ pride. A Chambers did not admit defeat.

But at what cost? Death was a better alternative than to admit you were wrong.

Lauren’s letter had more than just news about her miserable life in Last Hope or Last Prayer, or whatever that forsaken town in Nebraska was called. Ruth scanned the letter once more, looking for clues in what wasn’t written. Her sister was screaming for help, although the words didn’t explicitly appear on the page.



The door to the drawing room opened, and a man of average height appeared in the doorway. "Ruthie, are you ready? We'll be late for the theater if we don't leave soon." He was checking his pocket watch impatiently.

She lifted her eyes to see Samuel McIntyre, her escort for the evening. He hadn't been courting her long, and she was certain this outing of theirs would be their last.

He was a bore, like most of the men in Philadelphia were. None of them had any backbone, any sort of gumption. When they tried to assert themselves, it was only to subjugate the female to their wants and desires.

*Thank God she would never marry!*

"I believe I told you never to call me by my Christian name," she admonished him.

A bright flush shaded his face. "My apologies, Miss Chambers."

Mollified by his instant obedience to her demands, she pondered the problem with her sister.

Lauren should have never married Jonah Hale. Oh, she understood how Lauren was enamored by his unsophistication. Compared to Philadelphian men, he was different.

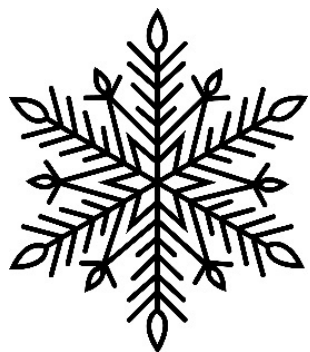
What woman wouldn't be attracted to 'different'?

But marriage only sought to enslave women in an institution meant to gratify a man's needs and wants and leave women to provide it at their own cost. How many suffragette meetings had they gone to over the past few years? How often had the women of those meetings shared stories of husbands who only dominated?

She had to rescue her sister from the dusty country wilds. Had to bring her back to the life that suited her. Away from the memories of a man who must have dominated her into submission and thus controlled her.

That's what her letter was saying. *Save me, Ruth. Save me!*

*Well, I will, sister.* Ruth vowed as she tucked the letter away in the side drawer and stood, as Samuel instantly offered her wrap to drape over her shoulders. *I'll be there as soon as I can.*



## CHAPTER ONE



### *May 1879, Last Chance, Nebraska*

Bands of steel wrapped around Lauren Hale's arms.

"No, please, don't do it!" A male voice cried out.

For a moment, she thought she had died as she'd planned, plunged into an icy baptism that would numb her from the pain forever.

*It wasn't true, though.*

She hadn't died, and she wasn't numb as evidenced by the hard, piercing grip biting into her flesh.

The man who had stopped her from taking that last step wore a taut expression. He wasn't an angel. No angel had angular features as he did, with a firm jaw, turbulent blue eyes, and long blondish hair whipping in the wind.

Maybe he was an angel's cousin. *What were they called?*

The thought made her laugh deliriously; the sound getting more fractured and maniacal even, screeching and wailing until she seemed to scream across the world.

If he would just let her go, she wouldn't feel the pain. That's what she wanted to be—numb and never feel again.

"It's all right, miss," the man soothed, his blue eyes softening from the hue of a storm-tossed sea to a brisk rain. "Scream. Don't be silent."

Her eyes watered. How could she still have tears when she'd cried her final one last night? "Please let me go, whoever you are."

"I can't. I won't let you go. What about your baby? Your daughter?"

*Esther.*

The wails ceased.

She finally looked away from the man to see the tiny basket resting under a nearby tree. Her breath hitched in her throat. Esther was asleep for once in the short time she'd been alive, giving her mother peace right before she—

"Is Esther... all right?" she choked out the words.

The man's face had changed again, the tautness melting away into one of hopefulness. "Is that her name? Esther?"

“Yes. That’s her name.”

Why was it so hard to speak?

“Yes, she’s fine. How old is she?”

Part of her knew the man was trying to distract her, to keep her from gaining strength to push him away and finish what she set out to do.

*Find oblivion.*

“She’s five months old,” she told him.

A knife stabbed the middle of her chest and she bent over, tears eking out of her eyes. “Why did Jonah have to die?”

“Who’s Jonah?”

She shook her head, not wanting to answer it. It hurt too much, so much!

“Please, Miss. Tell me who Jonah is.”

The man’s voice had a desperate edge to it, filled with concern and anguish. His eyes had changed once more, the blue turning stormy. Why should he be looking at her like that? She didn’t deserve his solicitude. It was Jonah who needed it.

But he wasn’t there anymore.

“Jonah is... was... my husband. And Esther’s father.”

A look of understanding appeared in his eyes. “He’s one of the men that perished, isn’t he? From the blizzards last year.”

She nodded, unable to speak.

“I’m so sorry.”

“So am I,” she whispered.

Wistfully, she gazed at the dark, cold water. It seemed to call her like a mother’s lullaby. The waves slapping against the shore were hypnotic, lulling her into a false security that all would be well. If she just stepped off the bank. The song of the wind lured her like an enchantress from some fairy tale story.

*Fairy tales.* How she wished she could still believe in them.

Her whole life until she came to Last Chance was a fairy tale.

Rose Red, the men of Philadelphia, had once called her, known for her beauty, vivacity, and charm. Highly sought after, nearly worshipped even, she enjoyed the attention she received from the male constituents. Unlike her sister, she had always planned to marry, but it always seemed as if that would come at some later point in time.

When she’d seen Jonah Hale five and a half years ago, she’d been riveted by him instantly. Out-of-place like a fish beached on the sand, she could not keep her eyes from straying to him. He was so unlike

the men who surrounded her parties, in the fancy clothes with stiff, upper crust attitudes she'd seen her entire life.

But Jonah, he was taller than them, broader than them, and not arrogant. In fact, whenever she glimpsed him throughout that night, he looked as if he'd rather be anywhere than at the soiree. When he returned to Nebraska, he wrote her a letter asking her to come west and be his bride. She left that very week.

"If I had never come to Philadelphia, I would have never met you," Jonah revealed to her more than once through their five-year marriage. At first, he'd said those words with the rose-colored spectacles of a man fully besotted with his wife. Sometimes, he'd hold her close and rock her in his arms, kissing her forehead tenderly as if unable to believe someone like him was married to someone like her.

Later, as the years went on, he'd said that phrase with something that sounded like regret and uncertainty. Then, towards those last months neither of them knew would be there, he'd say those words in a temper, his once shining eyes hard and cold. "*I should never have gone to Philadelphia.*"

"It would have been better if you hadn't," she yelled to him that final night before she never saw him again. "And I wouldn't be stuck in this forsaken country with a man like you."

He'd pivoted on one foot and left the room. In her fury and wretched pride, she let him, never knowing what would happen the next day.

"Do you want to check on Esther?"

The man pulled her from her horrible memories. For a second, she glanced back at the water, wanting to seek oblivion again. She watched the water rise and dip as it bounced through the miles of lonely river. She wondered if she jumped, would she bounce along to the great Missouri River, or if she'd simply sink to the bottom.

*To numb herself.*

As if he knew her thoughts, the man's hands tightened on her arm. "I won't let you."

"Why not? None of this is your concern."

Strangely, the man smiled. "You're angry with me."

Lauren drew back, feeling the fresh rush of blood on her face and traveling through her veins. *She was angry.* She hadn't felt angry since Esther was born.

And for it to happen so suddenly... *with this man.*

What did it mean?

"I am angry with you." She tried to yank her arm from his grip. "You're telling me what to do."

“Yes, I am. Now see to your daughter.” He let go of her arm.

Lauren straightened her back, but she turned away and walked over to where the tree stood by the bank, and got to her knees, nestling her daughter in her arms.

Immediately, Esther awakened and started crying. Lauren gripped the tiny bundle tighter in her arms, fussy cries muffled underneath the knitted wrap. She closed her eyes, willing the noise away. “Shh. Shh,” she whispered into the blanket. “It will be alright.” She loosened her grip and leaned the bundle back slightly to gaze into the large blue eyes surrounded by dark lashes. A small hand waved in the air. Lauren pulled the little hand to her lips and kissed the tiny fingers. Releasing a wracking sob, she wrapped the tiny hand back in the blanket and tried to ignore her feeling of despair.

Lifting her head, she looked across the river to the other side. She could see the ferry crossing the water, coming towards Last Chance.

*Last Chance.*

*Ha! she thought. This was her last chance. Her last chance to get away from everything.*

Looking at her precious daughter, Esther, named after Jonah’s mother, she felt her chest tighten. She looked just like Jonah. Tracing her fingertips over Esther’s cherubic features, Lauren sniffed.

“Momma loves you,” she cooed to her daughter. It was a lie, but Esther didn’t know that. How could she when the most important thing in her life right now was gumming her tiny fist?

Lauren glanced up as a tall shadow fell over her. The man stood there, looking down at her.

“Why?”

She didn’t pretend to not know what he was talking about. Hollowly, she answered. “I was going to. But she has her whole life ahead of her. I couldn’t take it.”



The steel band wrapped around Christopher Spaulding’s heart eased as he saw the woman look at the babe again, rocking in that age-old maternal way, trying to calm the baby’s cries.

He’d never been so scared in all his life!

The saying was that the Lord worked in mysterious ways. What could be truer than this moment?

Christopher hadn’t intended to walk by the river that morning, but he had just assisted a horse birth a foal that hadn’t turned. There was nothing more dangerous than a breech birth, especially if the mother couldn’t pass the placenta.

How could he have known he would take part in a procedure more dangerous than a breech birth?

Saving a woman from herself?

As he watched her, he couldn't get over the fact of how timely his appearance had been.

If he'd been one moment too late...

His lip thinned further. It didn't bear thinking.

The day had started off as he would expect. Millie Taylor fetched him that morning. Her husband, Robert, knew not a thing about animals other than how to saddle a horse and ride. He was happy to help, even if Millie married another man.

It was difficult to believe that he had only been in Last Chance for three months. When he finally arrived in March, to meet the woman he had corresponded with, he found her already married. Which suited Christopher fine. Getting married wasn't at the top of his list; he simply wanted an excuse to leave Richmond and go somewhere that his skills could be properly appreciated.

He was a learned doctor. Spending six years studying medicine and anatomy at one of the best schools in Virginia. He had a medical practice treating people's maladies, but it left him unfulfilled. People could be downright cruel sometimes, complaining if he couldn't snap his fingers and provide an immediate solution to their needs.

Most of the time, he didn't even receive any sort of payment for his services, and keeping an office open in Richmond was draining his finances. It wasn't until he was on his way home and he found a small child crying. The child's dog had caught its leg in a rodent trap and couldn't walk.

Christopher comforted the child and took the dog back to his office. After removing the trap from the dog's leg, he fixed it up with a splint and linen strips. The dog sat quietly through the entire procedure and even rewarded Christopher with several kisses.

At that moment, he knew he didn't want to treat people. He wanted to work with animals. They were nicer and didn't whine.

Unfortunately, animal doctors were considered quack medicine, and no one was willing to pay a doctor to tend to their animals if they were ill or needed care. It was as if God's creatures were a disposable commodity. It mortified his mother! What would her friends think?

His colleagues laughed at him. His mother threatened to disown him.

But Christopher knew in his heart that he was destined for something outside of Virginia. Something having to do with animals. He closed his practice and went to stay with a friend for a few months.

His friend had a cattle ranch thirty miles outside of Richmond, in a little town called Goochland.

There he spent months learning about bovines, equines, and even how to take care of the dogs and cats on the farm. He even had the fortunate experience of rescuing several orphaned opossums and caring for them before returning them to the wild.

It was rewarding work, but it wasn't enough. He wanted to branch out on his own. When he found the advertisement in the paper about the small town of Last Chance, he penned a letter and blindly mailed it to an unknown recipient. The letters were not sent to anyone specifically, rather a group of women that selected letters without knowing the contents.

It thrilled him when he received a letter from Millicent Reed. Although it didn't work out, he was pleased to have new friends with the local schoolteacher and her husband.

After making sure that the mother and foal were recovering nicely, he accepted a quick lunch with Millie and her family before heading back to town. Since Millie came to fetch him in her buggy, he was without transportation. Robert offered to give him a ride back to town, but since it was such a beautiful day, he walked.

There was a path he discovered which ran right along the edge of the river. There were trees scattered along the shoreline for shade, and the water provided a pleasant breeze compared to the hot dry air that was found in Nebraska summers.

As he approached the back of the churchyard, he heard the faint sound of crying in the air. It appeared to be coming from a large tree leaning towards the water. He stopped and listened. The crying grew stronger. Tilting his head, he strained his ears to see if he could find where it might be coming from. *It wasn't a wildcat.* He had heard the dangers of walking alone after mother cats gave birth to their young.

*Perhaps it was a fox?*

There were several fox dens underneath the large trees, and baby foxes sounded like small children when they cried. He shifted his doctoring bag to his other hand and continued walking. He'd simply walk around the tree as to not disturb the den.

Letting loose a low whistle, he hoped the foxes would scamper off or retreat underground.

Then he'd seen her.

A woman by the bank, her dark hair flowing in the wind, looking like some unearthly being. The crying came from the base of the tree, and it had quieted the moment he entered the vicinity.

The sight of the woman had arrested him, unable to breathe for



the strange way his heart hammered in his chest.

Then she'd taken a step.

And somehow, he knew. He knew...!

His hand instinctively wrapped around her to make sure she didn't step off the bank. He could finally convince her to check on the baby underneath the tree.

*Esther.*

A beautiful name. A biblical name.

He watched her kiss and coo the child in her arms. Finally, she carefully put the baby back in the basket and then lifted dull brown eyes to him.

His heart lurched in his chest. She looked *empty*.

"Miss, are you going to be all right?"

She nodded and lifted the small woven basket Esther was in. "I'll be fine." She tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear. "I think I'll walk over to see Heather."

"The midwife?" She nodded. "That is probably wise. I'll escort you there."

The woman hugged the basket closer to her. "At the risk of sounding rude, I'd like to walk alone."

Christopher shook his head slowly. "I don't think that's a good idea."

Her eyes lifted to him. "I will not hurt myself or my child. I admit that..." She stopped talking and what she didn't say howled around them on the winds. "Please, just give me a few moments to compose myself, sir, then you may escort me."

Christopher wasn't sure if he believed her, but he had no choice. "I'll be close by then, miss."

She gave him a nod. "Thank you."

Christopher walked away, going far enough to give her some privacy but still close enough to be of help. He leaned and settled against a tree, snatching up a blade of grass and chewing it.

He spied a couple walking towards the churchyard. They appeared to be arguing, and the woman lifted her hands in frustration and stormed out of sight. Christopher just shook his head. He turned around and noticed he couldn't see the pretty lady with the baby.

He chastised himself for letting her out of his sight. He had seen others with her malady before. It would manifest itself after a traumatic event, and childbirth created trauma to the body.

He pushed away from the tree and started down the path where he first walked. It was only a few seconds when his heart leapt in his

throat as he heard a piercing cry fill the air.



## CHAPTER TWO



The man had saved her life, but Lauren still wasn't grateful.

*Why wasn't she?*

Her moods traveled up and down, seesawing back and forth like a child's ride. One moment, she felt an almost euphoric high, the next she was standing on the bank of a river.

The man didn't know this wasn't the first time she'd done this. It was simply the first time she'd almost succeeded.

Shame crawled along her insides. Had God used the man to save her because He had some purpose for her? Or was he punishing her for Jonah's death?

Esther kept crying, and Lauren listlessly rocked her in the basket, feeling that strange mix of helplessness and anger that accompanied her every single time the babe cried. Lauren tried to focus on other things, but that only made her think about Jonah... *again*.

*Five years of marriage. No husband. A small child that depended on her for everything and no means of income.*

Dear Lord, what was wrong with her? Why couldn't she get out of this perpetual sadness that seemed to creep upon her?

Even her friend, Heather, who was the midwife in town, simply told her it was melancholy and most of the women in town were suffering from it. All Lauren needed to do was walk and breathe in the fresh air. Now the women were remarried or being courted by men from the East. Their stories were changing, and the melancholy seemed to lift from the town.

*But not for her.*

She turned to see if the man was still behind her. He was standing under the tree, chewing on a blade of grass. She needed to move further down. There was another tree a few yards ahead, and she pulled Esther closer and scurried to the shade darkening the ground.

As she stood in the shade, she looked at the water once more and contemplated her fate.

She glanced around and could finally see all the things she had missed before, when she was determined to take that irrevocable step. Now, she could see roots breaking through the bank and curl into the water.

Voices carried by the light breeze tickled her ears and she froze, waiting to see how close they were. Besides the man, she didn't think anyone else was here. She thought this was a private enough spot, behind the graveyard and a hedge of scraggly bushes.

*Pastor Collins and Beatrice.*

The clergyman and his sister were arguing about something, but the words didn't reach her ears.

Pastor Collins was the man who married her and Jonah. He was a prominent fixture in town, and right now, his primary purpose was to see the young women of Last Chance happily remarried. In the past, she knew if she talked to him about the heaviness on her heart, then he would insist that she remarry immediately or return home to Philadelphia.

Neither of those was an option for her.

As the voices faded, Lauren released her breath and looked at her beautiful baby once more. Brushing away the fat tears falling onto the baby's cheeks, she kissed her daughter on the cheeks. She'd spoken the truth to the man. The small child had the rest of her life ahead of her. It wouldn't be fair for Lauren to end it because her mother was emotionally unwell.

*That's it!* She thought with a sudden excitement rare in her for the past several months. There are plenty of women in town that can take care of a baby.

She stood. Could she really do it, though? Give her child over to another woman? The only part of Jonah left in the world. Lauren let out a long sigh. She'd already destroyed her husband and her marriage. She couldn't give up her child. With that resolve, such as it was, she turned to head back to town instead, wondering if the man would still accompany her, but the toe of her boot caught on a root peeking out of the dirt.

"Oh, no!" she cried as she tried to grab something to hold on to. Holding Esther in one arm, her fingers grasped at the empty air. Her boot slid down the edge of the embankment towards the murky water below. Esther, feeling her mother's distress, started wailing, high-pitched screams that pierced the air.

Grasping onto the root poking towards the water, Lauren tried to pull herself up, but her boots were slipping on the slimy shore. She would need both hands to climb back up. Grunting, she straightened her legs and pushed herself up, the mud sucking at her ankles.

The water, which she had seen as some sort of watery salvation, now took on a darkness she didn't want.

She needed to get Esther onto the muddy bank. With a heave, she

pulled herself up on the wet root and released her grip on the baby basket, dropping it into the wet grass. The baby shrieked louder.

"I'm coming, little one," Lauren cried as she tried to pull one boot from the sticky mud and placed it gingerly on a rock. The second foot released with a resounding pop that rocked Lauren backward and caused her to release her grip on the thick root.

She closed her eyes, as she knew she was about to fall into the river.

She didn't want to die. She knew that, now.

Her fingers scraped at the mud, as she slid down the bank.

"Jesus, save me! Help me!" she cried as the water enveloped her in darkness.



Christopher knew he shouldn't have left the woman! Despite her pleas, he should have stayed there and made sure she was all right.

Now, while his back was turned, she had—

He saw the baby basket on its side, dangerously close to the edge of the embankment. Running to the baby and righted the basket. The baby appeared angry, but fine. Christopher decided he would look at her after he found her mother. Kneeling at the edge of the river, he leaned over and looked along the shore.

A tree had fallen into the water. A large clump of roots was the only thing holding it to the embankment. He spied the woman clinging to the muddy trunk. He could tell she had gone under the water. Wet brown hair clung to her skin. The linen shirtwaist she wore was translucent, and the fabric clung to her skin. She was submerged from the waist down, and the water was tugging at her skirts, trying to push her downstream.

"Miss, are you alright?" he asked, reaching his hand down.

"Do I look alright?" the woman asked. "Help Esther."

He looked around. "I'll look at her in a minute. How did she end up here?"

She tilted her chin. "I dropped her when I fell."

"You fell?" He lowered his brow. "You weren't trying to harm yourself."

Swiftly, she shook her. "I swear to you. I was about to head back to where I left you when I tripped over something."

The tightness in his chest eased, and he could think clearly.

"Esther is crying, which means she's alive. Let's get you up first." He lay down in the mud on his belly. Reaching both hands over the side, he tried to reach her. "Give me your hand. I'll get you back up."

"I can't let go," she said as she tried to pull herself further up the branch. She fell back into the water and winced.

"Are you hurt?"

She shook her head. "Just scraped up from the bark."

"We can fix that," he whispered. He could see the exhaustion on her face, and panic was setting in. A good sign that she hadn't been trying to harm herself again. If she had, her face would bear an expression of serenity. Reassured, he needed to calm her down.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"L-I-Lauren Hale." Her teeth were chattering.

"Lauren, can you hold on for another moment? I need to get some help."

Lauren nodded. "Make sure Esther is alright."

Christopher could see her bobbing up and down in the water. Scrambling to his feet, he ran back to the basket and removed the baby from the muddy carrier. Christopher quickly opened the dirty wrapping and ran his fingers over the infant. Nothing appeared to be broken, and she had no cuts or scrapes.

Holding the child against his chest, he could see where Lauren had lost her footing, and the ground gave way under her feet. There were grooves in the wet dirt where she had slid down and where she tried to climb back up. An elegant boot stuck out from the mud, it's tan leather now a dark brown.

"Come on, little one," he cooed at the baby. "Let's get your momma some help." Looking around, the closest buildings were the schoolhouse and the church. He knew there wasn't anyone at the schoolhouse, so he headed towards the church. "Pastor Collins!" he said, racing around the side of the building.

Pastor Collins and his sister, Beatrice, were having a heated conversation on the steps of the parsonage. As approached the steps, they stopped speaking and looked at him.

"Goodness gracious, my man," the Pastor said. "You are a mess."

"What happened?" Bea said, putting her arms out for the baby. Christopher reluctantly put the little girls in Bea's arms. He watched her look at the child before her eyes snapped back to him. "This is Esther." Her eyes narrowed. "What are you doing with her?"

"Esther?" Pastor Collins interrupted.

"Lauren Hale's baby. You remember?"

The Pastor nodded. "That's right. I do now. Didn't realize she named the child."

"She's fallen," Christopher said, placing his hands on his muddy

pants.

"Who?" Bea and Pastor Collins asked at the same time.

"Lauren. She fell down the embankment and is holding onto a tree. I need some rope."

*No need to tell them the reason.*

"Oh, good heavens. The buggy house. There is some just inside the door." The pastor took off towards the buggy house with Christopher on his heels. Disappearing behind the door, the pastor emerged a minute later with a coiled length of rope.

Snatching the frayed length from the pastor's hands, Christopher raced back towards the tree where Lauren was stuck. The Pastor and Bea, with the crying baby, followed him. He popped his head over the side and Lauren was still here, clinging to the branch.

"Are you in distress?" he asked again, untangling the rope.

"Yes." He saw her shiver. "I'm cold."

"I'll go get some blankets," the pastor offered. "Bea, get that baby inside and clean it up."

"Warm some water. I'll bring her to the church once I lift her out of here," Christopher said. "Get those blankets as soon as you can. She's going to need them when she comes out of the water." The pastor headed back to the church with a wave.

"Is Esther alright?" Her voice was softer, and he could tell the chattering had stopped. That wasn't good.

She'd already come from a dark place. He didn't want that fight with herself to end from a bout with hypothermia.

Christopher sat on the ground. He could feel the wet dirt penetrate his wool pants. "She's alright. The pastor's sister has her."

"She wasn't hurt?"

"I think she's upset about being wet and muddy, but not a scratch on her."

"That's good." Lauren adjusted her arms over the tree. "I'm very tired."

"Don't you dare close your eyes, Lauren," he commanded. Her eyes opened and snapped to his. He could tell they were a deep brown. Mud dotted her face and hair. "We'll get you a warm bath as soon as I get you out of here."

"I didn't mean to fall." He could hear her voice shaking. She leaned her head forward against the tree trunk. "I was walking back to town, and the bank gave way."

"That's because of all the snow this winter. It doesn't have anywhere to go, so it eroded."



“Can you hurry?”

Christopher finished tying the last knot in the rope. “Heads up,” he said, swinging the rope towards Lauren. “Grab the rope as soon as you can.”

“I’m afraid I’ll fall.”

“Grab above the knot. I have the other end. You won’t go into the water. I promise.” He thought he saw a slight nod, so he swung the rope towards her. She lifted one arm from the trunk and reached for the rope, her fingers just skimming the large knot. “Let me try again.” It took several tries before Lauren could grasp onto the rope with one hand. She tucked it underneath herself and leaned once more on the trunk. “You need to hold on tightly, so I can pull you up.”

“I don’t know if I have the strength,” she said.

“Lauren,” Christopher implored, “look at me.” Her head was lying on her arms. “Look at me... *now*.”

He saw her flinch at the tone of his voice. But this was a matter of life and death. She could catch a fever from the chilled waters.

She lifted her head. “I can’t...”

*Why couldn’t she just grab the rope?* “You can. You must. I’ll pull you up. You just need to hold on to the rope. Can you do that?” The sounds of footsteps thundered down the path. Christopher looked up to see Pastor Collins carrying a blanket, followed by several townsfolk.

He had to get through to her. “Now, Lauren,” he said through gritted teeth. “Grasp the rope with both hands and don’t let go. Your baby needs you.”

She nodded and pushed herself slightly away from the tree. As soon as both hands were on the rope, he started pulling. Her legs dangled behind her as he slid her up the muddy bank. When she was on the grass, he dropped the rope and ran to her.

She didn’t move for a moment and then tried to push herself up on her arms, before laying back down. Christopher gently rolled her over. The front of her blouse and skirt were coated in the thick, sticky mud. He needed to get her out of sight of the many eyes that were crowding around. He had his suspicions that there was more to her story, but now wasn’t the place for questioning.

“Here,” Pastor Collins said, handing Christopher the blanket.

He draped it over the young woman and tucked it around her sides. Slipping his arms underneath her, he lifted her into his arms. She weighed no more than a feather. Her head rested against his chest, and he heard her moan.

“You hurting?” He felt her head moving back and forth. She was alright for now.

“Bring her to the parish,” Pastor Collins said, pushing everyone aside so Christopher could walk through the crowd.

He felt Lauren lift her head and look at him.

“Where’s my baby?” she asked before she went limp in his arms.



## CHAPTER THREE



Lauren blinked her eyes, trying to adjust to the surrounding darkness. The pungent scent of burning wood filled the air and a burning heat cocooned her body.

Had she died?

*Was she in hell?*

A single tear rolled down her cheek. She lifted her hand to brush it away, but realized it was trapped against her side. Wriggling a bit, she realized she was wrapped in several blankets, and that was why she felt so warm. She flexed her fingers and felt the scratchy wool. The blanket released a musty smell, as if the blanket hadn't been shaken out in a while. She didn't own a wool blanket, and she didn't think that there would be blankets in the lake of eternal fire.

Where was she?

*And where was Esther?*

She closed her eyes, trying to remember what happened.

Then it all came flooding back to her. *The man!* An angel's cousin. That's right!

He'd saved her.

She nibbled on that thought, chewing it this way and that. How did she really feel about him saving her? Lauren had gone there to never come back. It had been her punishment for what she'd done to Jonah.

She thought back over everything, looking at her life as if she were merely an observer, not a participant.

Jonah made beautiful furniture, the reason for his being in Philadelphia, to deliver it to his customer. Meeting Jonah at the party, falling in love with him, arguing with her sister before eloping to be with the man she loved. She had traveled from Philadelphia to Last Chance, eager to be Jonah's bride.

Even his occupation had added to her fairy tale. Jonah was a carpenter like Jesus. A noble profession, unlike the men of her company, who were idle on most days or spent too much time at the gaming halls, losing fortunes.

Last Chance was a small town, literally a dot on a map. To Jonah, it was a large town, boasting about 500 inhabitants. Lauren thought it

sounded charming and quaint.... Until she arrived.

It took five days by train until she reached the end of the line. *Literally*. Funds had run out for completing the track through Last Chance and onto Colorado. The stage would run along the river until it reached the ferry that carried it over to Last Chance, where it would then continue down towards Colorado.

Lauren recalled the stagecoach driver yelling, "Last Chance up ahead! Last chance to get off the stage!" She had never been as frightened as she was in those moments, when the Stagecoach crossed the river on the ferry, depositing her in the tiny town.

She immediately forgot her fears when they married that very afternoon in the small chapel at the end of town.

*Then the fairy tale ended.*

She groaned at the memories rushing so fast in her mind.

Jonah did everything he could to make her happy, but Last Chance was nothing like home. She didn't relate to the pioneer women that had carved out a lifestyle in the harsh land.

Her beauty and charm meant nothing out here. What was beauty when she didn't know how to garden or repair clothing? Her cooking skills were mediocre at best. Jonah was patient with her, but it wasn't enough.

Not for her.

Neither for him.

For two years, she had been asking Jonah to take them back to Philadelphia. She wanted to go back to what was familiar and easy. Never again would she find boredom in the life of high society. She'd welcome the life if only she and Jonah could go back.

Then they found out she was with child. She had never seen Jonah happier. How she felt about it, she hadn't been able to express because she simply didn't know. Having a child had put a damper on her plans. Jonah would be less likely to want to go to Philadelphia now.

But then September 1878 came, and life was never the same.

With the drought killing off most of the crops, no one had money to purchase furniture. She wasn't sure how they would survive the winter. Supplies were in short supply and the demand for the few items at the mercantile was so great, it drove the prices upward.

Lauren went from a woman who could purchase anything she wanted, to one that was budgeting pennies to purchase a pound of coffee. When Jonah heard about the hunt, he immediately joined it to provide meat for the winter. He didn't think twice. He simply knew he needed to provide for his family.

A good man. Jonah had been a good man, and she treated him

horribly.

Guilt surged through her again. The knife twisted in her chest.

Why had she treated him so badly? If only she could take it back!

*But you could,* a voice whispered. *You can take it back by being alive.*

Her mouth fell open at that thought.

She wanted to live! Her heart hurt as she remembered what she'd almost done to Esther.

*Thank you, Jesus, for saving me from myself!*

She wiggled her toes. Her feet were still in her stockings. Her mouth was dry—thick, stringy saliva coating her tongue. She didn't even have enough moisture to clear her throat. She needed water.

She needed to find her Esther and get back home.

Who was that man? She didn't recognize him and wondered if he lived in town. She would at least like to thank him for saving her and the baby.

She lifted herself up as best she could and peered around the dark room. There was no light to be had, apart from a faint light peeking underneath the door. Shadows blocked the light, then reappeared. There was someone standing outside the door.

Before she could call out, the door flew open, and light poured into the room. Lauren squinted her eyes so she could see, but all she could make out was a shadowy figure approaching the bed.

"Lauren!" Something heavy dropped on the bed near her knees. "I was so worried when I heard," a soft voice said. A chair scraped along the floor and the figure sat down, leaning a cool hand on Lauren's head.

"W-w-water," she choked out.

"Of course." The dark shadow called out the door before leaning over and raised the wick on the lamp, casting soft light into the room. A woman with blonde hair, a pert nose and rosy cheeks leaned back over her. "Let's loosen these blankets, shall we?"

Heather Blanton was the town midwife. Besides helping with babies, she provided general medicine and advice surrounding women's health issue. She was indispensable in helping Lauren during her pregnancy.

Another person entered the room. Lauren's eyes flew open as she recognized the angel's cousin.

Dried mud clung to his shirt and pants. Small flakes fell like dark snow as he walked. Now that her delirium had passed, she got a better look at him. He was very tall with broad shoulders. His hair was blond and curled around his ears.

“How’s the patient?” he asked softly, handing Heather the glass of water.

Heather put the glass down on the side table and tugged at the blankets covering Lauren. “I’m not sure yet. I need to get these covers off her.” She tugged once more, and Lauren felt herself rolling to the side. Heather put a hand on her shoulder to steady her. “Who wrapped her up so tight?”

That was when she realized she was cold and wet.

The man smirked. “That was the pastor, I believe. He had his sister wrap her up, so no one was tempted.”

“Tempted?” Heather snorted. “She looks like a drowned rat.”

“I’m right here, Heather,” Lauren choked out. “My ears are still working.”

With one more tug, Lauren’s arm was free. Heather patted it like comforting a child. “I didn’t mean it that way. You were just very wet.”

Lauren lifted her free arm and rubbed her nose. “I’ll take that water now,” she said, shaking off the blanket and lifting herself up on her elbows. Heather handed her the glass and Lauren drank it in one gulp before handing it back to Heather. “Thank you,” she said.

Heather handed the glass to the man and shooed him towards the door. “Let me talk to her.”

Lauren’s eyes watched as the man backed from the room. He left the door open, and Lauren saw Pastor Collins and Bea walking by the door.

*Was she at the parish house?*

She needed to get home.

She yanked the cover and tried to swing her legs over the side of the bed.

“You aren’t going anywhere,” Heather said, gently pushing Lauren back on the bed.

“I have imposed on everyone long enough,” Lauren said. “I am feeling much better.”

It was a lie, as were most of the things she was saying, but she needed to get out of the parish house. The last thing she wanted anyone to know was what she had tried to do this morning. She looked up at the man who had saved her life, not once but twice. Had he told anyone what happened? Her face burned with embarrassment and shame. She didn’t want anyone to know how far she had gone.

Lauren’s eyes drifted to the man again. No one had seen her at the lowest, as he had. Inexplicably, her pain bonded them. His eyes were inscrutable. *Oh*, but she wondered if he felt the same connection that

she was feeling as well.

“Let me be the judge of that,” Heather said with kind eyes fixed on her. If anyone else had said that, the statement would appear as being pompous and superior. Anyone who knew Heather knew she wasn’t like that. “Lauren, what were you doing at the bank of the river?”

Swiftly, her eyes went to the man. *Dear Lord, have you told her?* she thought

The sound of her heart beating eclipsed everything else. No one would understand. They would judge her because they would think she was a terrible mother for wanting to ease her suffering. She turned her eyes back to her friend. Concern etched Heather’s pretty features.

“I wanted to get some fresh air like you said I should, Heather. I walked too close to the bank and my foot caught on something. When I tried to get my balance, I slipped.”

“It’s a good thing that I was there then, isn’t it?” the man said. Then, he gave her a slight nod as if to say her secret was safe with him.

“Lauren, I know things have been difficult; especially after Esther was born. She’s been a very colicky baby, and you have been suffering from severe melancholy. I just didn’t know how bad it was. Once I think you have rested enough, I’ll let you go home. But for right now, Lauren, you’re going to lay right there and let me take care of you.”

Lauren blinked rapidly so the telltale sign of her tears would not be seen. *Heather cared.* Why did she forget that when she stood on the edge of the river?

Pastor Collins came into the room and moved behind Heather. He leaned over the midwife and reached towards Lauren. “I want to pray for you, Lauren. I was worried about you when I saw you flailing about in the water. You are part of my flock that the good Lord, Himself gave to me. And just like the Good Shepherd, I want nothing to happen to any of my sheep. I stand between my sheep and the wolves of sin that would try to wrestle you from my grasp.”

Lauren didn’t know whether to be thankful or to roll her eyes. Pastor Collins was a mix of a righteous man and a pompous man. There were times she didn’t know which one he was. Looking in her heart, she wanted to think he was being righteous in the moment. Pompous or not, she needed prayer.

“Thank you, Pastor. I’d appreciate it.”

The pastor moved around Heather and stood by the bed. Taking Lauren’s hand, he said a prayer over her. Surprising, given that the pastor was a master at pontificating, the prayer wasn’t a long one. When it was over, everyone left, except Heather and the man who



saved her.

The midwife sent a questioning look to the man. "Is there something I can help you with, Dr. Spaulding?"

*Doctor?* He was a doctor? Lauren closed her eyes. *Her humiliation was now complete.*

When she opened them, Heather and the doctor were standing over the bed. Lauren took a deep swallow. "Heather, may I speak to Dr. Spaulding in private for a few moments?"

Heather raised her eyebrow as if wanting to say no. Her glance shifted from Lauren to the doctor. Finally, she nodded and picked up her doctor bag. "Only a few minutes, and then I want you to rest. Esther will be fine with me."

The door shut behind her, and the silence encapsulated them. Lauren shifted back and forth under the covers that held her fast to the bed. She watched as the doctor sat down in the chair Heather vacated a few moments before. He rested his elbows on his knees and steepled his fingers, resting them on his lips.

His gaze was incredibly unnerving. Even though she had asked to speak to him, words weren't forming in her throat. Lauren looked around the room, hoping that he would be gone by the time she looked back. *He wasn't.*

He lowered his hands, clasping them between his knees. "What did you want to talk about?"

"W-why didn't you tell her what really happened?"



## CHAPTER FOUR



“I wish I could answer that question, Mrs. Hale,” Christopher said slowly as he leaned towards the bed. “But I figured if you wanted people to know, you would have told them yourself.”

Lauren looked away. “It is very difficult for people to understand. But thank you for not saying anything.”

He believed her.

Animals couldn’t talk like men could, but they had ways of expressing themselves without the use of words. Sadness with whines, flattened ears, or standoffish positioning of their bodies. Christopher recognized those same signs in Lauren.

Though he had rescued her from the water, there was still the darkness inside of her.

He may have saved her from herself in a physical sense, but the actual battle was on the inside. Inside her very mind.

Raising his hand to drag it through his hair, he realized once again that he was filthy. The clothes, damp and dirty, were uncomfortable. If he left now, he could go home, clean up, and get into some fresh clothes.

Looking at Lauren once more, and knew he couldn’t leave her alone. *Not now.*

*You don’t have to stay here. The midwife is here, along with the pastor and his sister.*

When his eyes touched on her figure, he knew he would stay, no matter how uncomfortable he was. “I’m an animal doctor.”

Lauren turned back around. “Are you? I’d no idea.”

Now that he’d said it aloud, he felt silly. Why would she care about that when she’d just gone through a harrowing experience? He waited for her to ridicule him. Everyone did at some point. When she did nothing more than look expectantly at him, he swallowed and pushed on. “I say that because I work at making animals feel better. They talk to me sometimes.”

Her lips lifted into a half smile. “Do they?”

“Yes. They tell me many things. And I keep their secrets for them.”

A look of comprehension entered her face. “I see what you mean.”

Christopher could tell that she caught his meaning. He was glad she didn't laugh when he said animals could talk to him. "If you ever want to talk, I'm right here."

Now her mouth lifted in a full smile. His breath caught. The woman was truly a beauty. He couldn't tell earlier when she was in turmoil.

"Thank you, Dr. Spaulding."

Clearing his throat and tugging on the collar of his shirt, he said, "I'll wait outside until you're ready to go."

Hastily, he went toward the door and opened it.

"There's no need for that."

He left the room, closing the door without answering her.

Outside the room, he saw Heather talking quietly to Pastor Collins's sister. When she saw him come out of the room, she excused herself.

"Dr. Spaulding, I want you to tell me something. Is there anything about what happened at the river that I need to know?"

Shaking his head, he answered, "Everything that was said is what happened."

Heather gave him a shrewd look. "I find it interesting that Lauren was with Esther at the riverbank for no reason. She would not be visiting anyone. She was just at the riverbank with her daughter. Can you understand why I would feel suspicious about such a detail?"

Christopher thought back to the vulnerability he saw on Lauren's face. It was that sadness that evoked something inside of himself. When she stood on the riverbank ready to throw herself in, he knew he could not allow that to happen. He would have done the same for anyone he saw in that predicament. What he didn't understand was his own protective instincts coming forward.

It had been some time since he cared about his fellow man. Or in this case, fellow woman. His life had been spent working with the animals who were more forgiving and loving than people. Even when Millie had rejected him as a husband, he hadn't cared too much about that.

But he cared about that vulnerable woman in the room. He wanted to know why she thought that was the answer. She was too lovely to throw herself away.

He pulled out of his musings to see Heather was waiting for his answer. From the knowing look in her eye, he gathered she perceived he was holding something back.

*And he was.*

Lauren Hale was mysterious, and the secret he carried seemed to

connect them. Which made no lick of sense as they had just met today. Still, he stuck by his word. If Lauren wanted anyone to know about what she almost did down at the river, then it was up to her to tell them. He knew Heather wouldn't be satisfied until she had an answer. He didn't want to lie, so he told her the truth.

"She mentioned she was going to see you. Perhaps the walk by the river was more scenic." Heather tilted her head as if weighing his words. Christopher cleared his throat. "How's the child?" he asked.

"She's doing well. Sleeping now after all the excitement."

Going on to where the child was lying, he studied the babe's face. She slept peacefully, her tiny fist resting against her cheek.

Straightening up, he said, "Miss Heather, I'm going to wait here until Mrs. Hale wakes up from her nap."

Pastor Colin spoke up. "Why would you want to do that? We can see to her without your help."

Christopher could see the suspicion in the pastor's eyes. The man seemed inordinately concerned that people did not sin under his watch. What did he think he was going to do to the woman? *Try to accost her?*

He wouldn't let the man intimidate him, though. "Because I was there to help her, Pastor Collins. I want to have the honor of seeing her home. There is nothing more than that beyond the reason for my escort."

Pastor Collins opened his mouth to say something when his sister spoke up. "Barnaby, be quiet. If Doctor Spaulding was going to do anything, he would have done it with none of us being there. His intentions must be honorable."

The pastor glared at his sister.

Christopher sent her a thankful glance. The woman wasn't the most attractive one in town, but he sensed a gentle spirit about her. "I'll wait outside until it's time to escort Mrs. Hale home."

Without another word, he went out of the house and settled on a wooden bench under the tree and waited until Lauren was ready to leave.



Ruth suspected that people who were very poor were the only ones who wanted to go west. The west was certainly welcomed to them. For herself, if she never saw the west again, it would be too soon.

There wasn't a part of her that wasn't covered in dust.

It scratched the inside of her eyes, coated her tongue, sheathed her hair, and scraped like fine needles across her body. Every single

surface inside and out of the overland stage was covered in the brown dust. The wooden wheels kicked up rocks that hit against the outside of the carriage with a small series of pops. Ruth was grateful for the shade that covered the window. It made the inside insufferably warm, but that was better than having one of the rocks hit her in the face.

Tendrils of the dust curled around the fabric and gathered in a cloud in the middle of the carriage. If she didn't know better, she would think there was some vicious horrible being running next to the vehicle blowing dust into her face at every opportunity!

Her teeth hurt from clenching so hard as the stagecoach rattled along the rocky ground.

Ruth bit back her complaints she wished she could give voice to. After all, she wasn't the only one uncomfortable. She was cramped between people she did not know or wish to know. One man, an oily looking fellow, smelled so bad she would have given money for him to jump in a puddle of water. Across from her was a woman with her husband and a baby. Every so often she would have to see to the needs of the child, who cried incessantly. Why on earth the stagecoach driver allowed it, she had no idea. Whatever the reason, the babe needed to have its nourishment. *Unfortunately, there was no privacy.* The other men in the vehicle showed they were raised with some sort of decency and were respectful enough to turn their heads whenever that happened.

Everywhere she turned she was surrounded by uncouth, unsophisticated, and uneducated people. If she could have ridden the rest of the way unconscious she would have.

*How had Snow White and Rose Red fallen!*

It was only for the fact that she sensed Lauren needed her that she did what she could to endure the harrowing journey. She lifted the window covering a bit and waited for the cloud of dust to dissipate so she could see some of the scenery. The coach was passing rolling hills and wide-open spaces that seemed to extend into an eternal expanse. The sun caused the landscape to shimmer in the heat. She could have been dropped in the middle of a desert if it weren't for the masses of emerald, silky-looking grass waving as the coach raced past.

How long would this journey last? She had no idea. *But it couldn't end soon enough.* And when it did end, she was going to take Lauren and drag her back to civilization where they both belonged. There, they could enjoy the theater, various women's issues functions, lively politics, a robust city life, evening parties, and so much more.

*What could a person do out here in the west but talk to their horses and eat grass all day?*

Ruth couldn't help but wonder why her sister hadn't sent for her

before now? Surely, she could not have been happy. And based off what she read in the letter she knew that was the case. Her gloved hand tightened into a fist. Why had that horrid man taken away her beloved sister from everything she had known?

No, Ruth told herself. It wasn't Jonah that took her sister away. *Lauren took herself away.* She took an unfortunate gamble on marriage and lost.

*And now Lauren was living to regret it.*

As the woman across from her once again saw to the needs of her child, Ruth remembered that Lauren mentioned she was expecting. Ruth couldn't remember when the baby was due, and she hadn't heard anything since the last letter.

She raised her eyes towards the ceiling of the coach and said a little prayer for Lauren. She hoped that her sister was all right.

The sound of a soft lullaby filled the coach as the mother rocked her baby to sleep. Ruth managed a smile. Once asleep, she had to admit the child was rather charming. Some part of her wished to see what Lauren's baby would look like. She wished Lauren had taken precautions to prevent such a thing from happening. One refrain that the leaders at the women's issues meetings often stated was that marriage and childbearing were shackles that kept women locked in the institution of servitude. Once a woman was a wife and then a mother, she was no longer a woman but chattel to a man and to those children of his loins. *It was too late now, however.*

Ruth was so thankful that she would never marry. And Lauren was going to be glad, too, that she was coming to save her from this life of misery.

A particularly large billowing cloud of dust enclosed the stagecoach, causing Ruth to sneeze several times into her linen handkerchief.

*When would this awful journey end?*





## CHAPTER FIVE



Esther was crying again.

Lauren wondered if staying above water was the best decision.

She flinched at the darkness of her own thoughts.

Yes, she was thankful that she and her daughter were living to see the next week ever since the incident at the riverbank. Despite that, life had very little joy for her. Why couldn't she feel any sort of pleasure?

An image of Jonah's face flashed in her mind from that last night. She sobbed, her fingers clutching at her throat. Why has she said those awful things? Jonah had done the very best he could for her. Why had she let her selfish desires prevent her from seeing that?

And yet Esther was still colicky. Lauren stared at the child in the basket. The baby's face was wet with tears and her cheeks were red like an apple. On one hand she knew she was supposed to reach out and grab the baby and comfort it. But there was such a heaviness that fell on her shoulders. And no matter how hard she tried, she could not get enough strength and concern to move forward and help the baby.

*If you hadn't made Jonah feel so terrible, the voice echoed in her head, he would be here and there would be someone to help you with Esther.*

The pain of everything filled her mind once more. She was a failure as a wife and as a mother. Suddenly once again the siren song of the water called to her.

*Come join me, the water lapping against the riverbank seem to say. Get away from your failures and come be with me.*

Maybe she should walk back towards the water. She closed her eyes and willed the thoughts to dissipate. The sound of a pounding on her door forced her eyes open. It was so abrupt, the voices left immediately, along with the heaviness surrounding her.

She shook her head to dispel the last thoughts and reached for Esther, lifting the crying child against her shoulder. "Shh," she whispered against Esther's hair as she bounced her. "Hush my darling. Hush my darling." Esther hiccupped and gummed her tiny fist. Lauren leaned the baby back and rocked her until the tears subsided.

The knock on the door startled her—she forgot someone was there.

Shifting Esther into the crook of her arm, she walked over to the door and opened it, giving a short gasp of surprise. It took a moment for her to recognize the figure standing on the steps through her puffy eyes.

“Dr. Spaulding.” She wasn’t expecting visitors. She quickly glanced at her dress and grimaced. There was nothing to be done about it now.

“Good morning, Mrs. Hale,” he said cheerfully.

Lauren continued to rock Esther in her arms. She swallowed at the concerned look on the doctor's face. His blue eyes with their ever-changing colors looked like the blue of a clear dawn morning.

“I’m surprised to see you so soon,” she said. “What can I do for you today, Dr. Spaulding?”

“Come now, Mrs. Hale. I have been checking on you for the past week.”

Lauren drew in a deep breath. Ever since the doctor rescued her, he stopped by every morning to see about her welfare. The first time it happened she sent him on his way, assuring him that she was well recovered from the incident. Several times he tried to pull her into conversation about her emotional state, but she assured him everything was fine.

*She knew she was a terrible liar.*

Did he think that because he did not tell anyone what she had tried to do, that he had the right to pester her? No! He did not have that right and she wasn't going to let him bully her into talking about something she had no desire to discuss.

Something her sister Ruth had said boomed in her brain.

*“Don't ever put yourself in a position where you are beholden to a man. Do not allow him in formalities and do not ever give him the advantage over your life.”*

She could see the truth of her sister's words as Dr. Spaulding refused to leave her alone.

But what if he was just trying to help? She shouldn’t turn that away.

*Dear Lord, help me!* she silently pleaded. She didn’t know what to think. How she wished she could just simply forget what she had done. Just like she wished she could forget that last night with Jonah.

If Dr. Spaulding kept coming around and looking at her with those eyes! If he acted as though he really cared about her, even though he knew nothing about her. If she could just put the incident out of her mind – which she couldn’t if he kept coming around!

She stood as tall as she could and held her shoulders back. “Dr. Spaulding, you are not my husband. Nor are you of any relation to me

in any fashion,” she said with more strength than she felt. “I appreciate what you did for me last week but there is no need for you to continue to come check on me. As you can see, Esther and I are quite well.”

Dr. Spaulding’s face broke out in a wide grin, and he put his head back and laughed. A hearty laugh that resonated from deep in his belly. Lauren felt her cheeks grow warm. His laugh drew the attention of several people walking down the road.

She noticed them sending glances their way.

Grabbing his arm, she pulled him inside the house and closed the door behind them. Turning around, she pressed her back against the door. He continued to grin.

He was already a handsome man but when he smiled, his entire face changed. Why would she notice how handsome he was? She said she would never notice a man again after Jonah. She wouldn’t put another man through living with her as a wife. It didn’t matter how handsome he was. She did not want him here.

“I’m glad to see that my presence today has upset you,” he finally said.

Lauren’s head jerk back to look at him. “What in the world does that mean? That you’re happy I’m upset? You are the one that keeps coming here every day to see about my welfare.”

“Mrs. Hale, I am an animal doctor.”

“I am not an animal, Dr. Spaulding.”

“No. But, I know a wounded soul when I see one.”

“I am not a wounded soul, either.” She paused to wipe her nose on her sleeve. “I am doing just fine.”

He took a step closer and brushed away the wetness on her cheek. “Is that why Esther was crying for ten minutes before I even knocked on the door?”

Her heart leapt inside of her throat. “How dare you listen in on my life?”

Dr. Spaulding gave her a patient look. “It is impossible to not hear the cries of a screaming baby. Especially one that has cried for 10 minutes without any intervention from the mother.”

Her face reddened. “Please leave.”

The man was getting under her skin. She wanted him to leave her alone. She wanted him to stay. Why was it such a contradiction? There was a tiny voice that did not want to admit it even to herself that she was glad he came every day to check on her. Was it because deep down inside she wanted him to rescue her again? But what would he rescue her from this time? Motherhood? A broken heart?

*Herself?* No man could do that.

“Mrs. Hale.” The doctor took another step forward. Lauren pressed her back even harder against the door, her fingers scraping against the wood. “Lauren,” he said emphatically. “I am worried about you. I care about you.”

Tears started to form in her eyes, and she blinked rapidly as one escaped and fell in a salty trail down her cheek. Bending at the waist, she held Esther tight against herself and lifted her head, emitting a wail unlike any she had ever heard before. It reverberated against the walls and echoed through the tiny house. Her lungs expanded to capacity as she produced a noise that sounded as though it escaped from the deepest level of hell.

Dr. Spauling immediately took Esther from her arms and placed the babe back in her blanket. Lauren was too consumed in her grief to care. Wrapping her arms around her middle she slid down to the floor, her knees tucked against her. Tendrils of her hair caught on splinters, begging to be released as she rocked her head from side to side.

“Come here, sweetheart,” a voice said softly. She felt fingers wrap around her arms, lifting her back against the door, before she was wrapped in a warm embrace.



## CHAPTER SIX



Christopher wrapped his arms around the fragile creature. She fit perfectly in his embrace. He pressed his head against the top of her head and whispered comforting words against her hair. “Let it out, sweetheart,” he said. He knew she needed to let the pain out.

The crying was cathartic.

Once she released everything she had inside her, healing could begin.

He wasn’t a praying man. There were too many times he didn’t mince words when speaking with the man upstairs. Of course, he believed, he just didn’t pray. *Often*. If animals didn’t pray, why should he?

Since the moment he had found Lauren by the river and then rescued her from the raging water, he had been unable to get her out of his mind. He knew there was something wrong with her. Not necessarily physical. But something that would need time to heal. There was a bothersome voice at the back of his head that refused to be silent.

She needed help.

*His help.*

As he prepared to do his work for the day, he made a point to stop by to see how she was doing. She was his first stop about town. The first few times she pasted on a bright smile and assured him she was well recovered from her scene by the river. *He knew better*. The smile never reached her eyes.

And she looked unkempt.

Not in a slovenly, horrible way. Even untidy, she was still a lovely woman. It was dullness in her eyes he could not get past. Her hair had lost its sheen, and her skin looked lifeless. Her clothes were wrinkled and dotted with milk stains.

Once, he had administered help to a wounded dog that had been beaten by some children and left for dead. The dog’s eyes were empty and sorrowful, as if it had lost all hope in humanity. It had taken all his skill and knowledge, but he was able to save the dog and give it hope again. He refused to leave the dog’s side; and he worked with the dog, until the dog learned that there were kind people and much

good to be had in the world.

He sensed that same sorrow in Lauren, but on a greater scale. She was a woman whose images invaded his thoughts more often than not. There were times when, in his bed at night before he'd close his eyes, he'd be completely overwhelmed by a need to pray for her. And even though he hadn't prayed much in the past few years, he prayed more in this week than ever before.

Soon her wails turned to sobs, which in turn became sniffles. Her face was buried in the fabric of his jacket. He pushed her back a bit and she lifted her head from the dark wool. Tears and mucus streaked the front of his coat and her puffy eyes widened as she tried to brush the fluid away.

"I am so sorry," she choked out. "I've ruined your jacket."

"I can get it laundered. Not to worry. Let's get you seated." She drew away, tears trailing down her pale cheeks. Her lips parted as she tried to catch her breath. Gently, he took his thumbs and rubbed the tears away. "I promise, I'm only here to help you."

She shuddered and then moved around him towards the settee. He turned to follow her and finally was able to take a good look at the house. Previously she would meet him at the door and not allow him in.

The house was in a curious disarray. Unclean nappies, glass bottles with soured milk, and unwashed baby clothes were strewn about the place. The smell wasn't pleasant, but it didn't reek with filth either.

"I'm so sorry that everything is in such disarray," she said, her face reddening again. "Ever since I had Esther, I've been unable to keep up with housework."

Christopher looked at her clothes, they were made of silk, which was uncommon as most of the women wore linen or calico. Her hair needed to be brushed, but she had the sides pulled back with a brilliant mother-of-pearl comb with fine gems dotting the crown.

"Did you always live in Nebraska, Mrs. Hale?"

A scornful laugh exited her mouth as she picked Esther up from the basket and moved her to a bassinet in the corner of the room. "Oh, goodness no. I came here when I married Jonah."

As she changed Esther's nappy, she related her life before her marriage. He noted the way she spoke. Her face had taken on an animation that hadn't been there before. The dull eyes now had a sparkle, and her strain-lined lips were soft and red.

"I see," he said when she finally took a breath.

"Oh, I must have bored you into the doldrums with that. Please forgive me."

“There’s nothing to forgive. I asked, didn’t I?”

She nodded slowly, a thoughtful expression on her face. “You did. It’s just that Jonah disliked hearing me talk about my life back home. He said it made me pine for things he couldn’t give me.”

Silence lingered after that telling outburst. Christopher could see how shocked she was at revealing that interesting tidbit of her married life. He recalled his mother saying that ladies never discussed intimate details such as marriage within anyone.

“Would you like some coffee, Dr. Spaulding? It’s the least I could do,” she said wryly.

Christopher didn’t think it was an exaggeration.

“Please.”

As she went about making coffee, he went over to where she had put Esther in the bassinet. The child had stopped crying, but she gummed at her hands rather incessantly. A moment later, the child’s face scrunched up and she began to cry again.

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake, will she ever be quiet!” Lauren shouted as she thumped one of the mugs onto a cluttered counter. “I just stopped her from crying and she’s crying again.”

Christopher looked at Lauren. “Babies cry, don’t they?”

“Yes, but she always cries. Heather has been here several times because we thought something was wrong, but we can’t seem to find anything. I’ve changed her nappy, she’s been fed. What else could she want?”

Lauren’s anger seemed to increase the more she listed her daughter’s complaints. Something about it didn’t sit well with Christopher. “Well, let me see if I can calm her down.”

He gulped. Dear Lord, he’d never held a baby this young before. Matter of fact, the last time he held a baby, it had four legs and hooves and he’d had to dart away before the mother kicked him in the forehead.

But he had to try. Give this mysterious woman some relief.

“You’re a man. What do you know of holding babies?”

Giving her a sheepish grin, he said, “Nothing. But I would like for you to show me.”

Lauren gave him a long look. “Why are you doing this?”

“I want to help you however I can,” he said simply. “Now, before this young lady begins to bring down the roof over our heads. Why don’t you show me how to hold her?”

Leaving the coffee pot on to boil, Lauren came and picked up the squalling baby. Giving him explicit instructions, he was soon holding



the child in his arms.

“Esther,” he said the baby’s name.

In an instant, the child stopped crying, her eyes as wide as saucers. She gazed up at him as if she never seen anything like him.

Which, perhaps she hadn’t.

“Mrs. Hale, do you have some of the women come and help you from time to time?”

She shook her head. “They’ve offered, but I’ve refused.”

“Why?”

“Because of this.” Her arms gestured around the house.

Esther continued to gaze at him. Her pupils become so enlarged he almost didn’t see any hint of color. He didn’t know how to take that.

“I would think the women would be willing to help you.”

She bit at her lower lip, sitting down on a chair. “They would. I know they would. I remember when Altar Laingsburg had her twins, Omega and Alpha.”

“Omega and Alpha?” He blinked. “All right.”

She gave him a hint of a smile. “I overheard her husband, Wolfe say if and when they have another child, she’s not allowed to name any more.”

“God spare the children.”

“But I’m ashamed, Dr. Spaulding.” Her fiddled with her hands.

“Ashamed of what?”

She folded her arms and looked out at something only she could see. “The women in town are able to handle life out here better than me. I’ve been to a few of their houses. They’re immaculate almost, clean, and well stocked. I never cleaned anything in my life. My parents had servants when we were in Philadelphia, and they took care of everything.”

“I see.”

Esther shifted in his arms, and he glanced down to her tiny head snuggled against his chest. As she moved something jolted in his heart. It coiled around it, and squeezed gently, taking root. He knew that, as sure as he knew what his name was.

“When I met Jonah, and he told me about his life here. It sounded adventurous. Exciting. Peaceful.” She shook her head. “The adventure stopped soon enough. The excitement comes in the form of wild animals and Indians and the peace... well, let me just say peace and boredom could be the same. After a few days of bliss, the arduous toil began.”

“Did you ever try to get help?”

“Jonah felt I should learn to take care of the house like all the other women here in Last Chance.”

Christopher frowned. “Not to speak ill of the dead, or criticize your husband, but that doesn’t seem to be fair to you. Didn’t he know you didn’t know how to live out here?”

Lauren shook her head. “We were so silly. We loved each other so much I think we overlooked our faults.”

“In what way?”

“Jonah used to call me his ‘China doll’. He said that I was delicate and fragile. In the past, he used to say this with admiration, but as my ineptitudes became more and more apparent, it began to wear on him.”

A suspicious thought crossed his mind. “Was he cruel to you, Mrs. Hale?”

A startled look came to her eyes. “Cruel? Jonah? Not at all. I do believe he was frustrated with me many times, but he was never cruel.”

The strange panic left.

“That’s good to hear. Some men aren’t kind at all.”

She sent him an odd look, one full of an inward amusement. “If my sister heard that she would correct you. She’d tell you that all men are cruel and they all need to go off to some forsaken war and be killed.”

“Indeed? Is your sister...,” his voice trailed off.

“Yes, she is. And she would be the first to tell you she is a harridan, a bluestocking and a nuisance.”

“She seems charming.”

Lauren’s head tilted to the side. “Oh, she does have charm. It’s hidden under a layer of ice. But, if my sister ever met a man who can melt that part of her, he would find a blazing fire of warmth.”

That seemed hard for him to believe but what did he know about women? This one before him confused him more than any he had ever known. It was better he kept to horses and bovines.

“I’d like to help.”

She ignored his offer. “She’s sleeping,” Lauren said, pointing to the child.

Christopher glanced down to see the child had indeed fallen asleep. Her tiny mouth opened and closed. “Mrs. Hale, please let me reach out and get some help for you.”

She started to shake her head. “No, you can’t.”

“There is no shame in asking for help,” he said softly. “You obviously need it. You can’t continue to do it on your own.”

“But then everyone would know how inept I am.” She shuddered at the thought. “They will look down on me.”

“What is pride but a stumbling block?”

“Should I call you Pastor Collins now?”

A small jolt of anger coursed through his veins at being compared to the local clergyman. “Please, let me get help for you.” He would resort to begging if it meant saving her.

The coffee pot started to spit, the brew hissing as it hit the hot stove. Lauren grabbed an apron that was draped over a chair and used it to lift the pot from the burner. Christopher laid the baby back in the bassinet and moved to the table to watch as she poured two cups of coffee and laced them with cream and heavy sugar. She passed him one of the cups before sitting at the table across from him.

She looked at the coffee for a moment before lifting her head to meet his gaze. She spoke so softly it took a moment for his brain to register the words.

“Yes. You can help me.”

He smiled at her before he took a sip of coffee. “You won’t regret it, Lauren, I swear to you.”



## CHAPTER SEVEN



Lauren threw herself back on the pillow and raised her arms above her head. She should be asleep, but sleep was fleeting. The afternoon played through her mind.

Dr. Spaulding had said she wouldn't regret it. *Too late*. She already was. Why had she told him all those intimate details? Things she hadn't told another soul. She didn't even tell her sister the truth in any of the letters she wrote her all those months ago.

But when she was around Dr. Spaulding... Christopher... she found herself just speaking. Volunteering information, even.

*You won't regret it, Lauren. I swear to you.*

How earnest he looked when he said those words. She couldn't forget either, how he reached out and grabbed her hand, holding it tight in his own large one, as if he wanted to make sure she understood the validity of his promise.

During that brief contact, the heat of his hand flowed along her skin. She started at the sensation, wondering why it should happen? Then, she made a slight movement and he immediately released her, looking as confused as she felt.

Lauren stared up at the ceiling in her bedroom that she once shared with Jonah. Even though she regretted revealing the things in her heart, it was freeing at the same time. She had no idea how much she needed to discuss the things that had been swimming around in her mind. Talking to Christopher had been soothing and calming to her nerves. When he walked into her home, he did not look at it with distaste. As a matter of fact, he barely seemed to notice it.

He comforted her when she needed it the most. She could still feel his arms around her.

If she only could feel them now.

*Stop it, Lauren!* she admonished herself. He was only comforting her in the bonds of friendship. Nothing more, and she shouldn't try to read anything into it. She rolled to her side and punched the pillow, tucking it underneath her head. Moonlight streamed into the room, and she could see Esther moving in the cradle near the window.

Jonah had made the beautiful cherry wood cradle with its solid bottom, carved spindles and strong end supports. It was the last piece

of furniture he made. He was so proud when he brought it in the house and Lauren couldn't even thank him for it.

She watched as Esther kicked her tiny feet in the air and tried to grab her toes to put them in her mouth. The baby squealed with delight when she managed to grasp her pudgy fingers around one of her tootsies. Esther could help but smile as she listened to her daughter make tiny noises and blow bubbles as she entertained herself.

Why couldn't Esther be like this all the time?

It didn't take Christopher very long to get Esther to calm down. In fact, the babe fell asleep almost immediately when in the doctor's arms. It felt good to have someone else take care of Esther for even just a few moments. Perhaps he was right.

She did need help.

His idea to reach out to the women of Last Chance wasn't a bad one. She had enough of the Chambers' pride to find fault with the idea but was miserable enough to give it consideration. When she first married Jonah, she wanted to be the type of wife to make him proud. But her inability to be the type of wife he needed caused a rift between them.

While she talked to Christopher about her marriage with Jonah, she realized that maybe everything wasn't her fault. She and Jonah had loved each other. Perhaps they had rushed into marriage without thinking about the ramifications of their different backgrounds and lifestyles? Jonah had expectations of her that she could not have fully met. She had requirements that Jonah could not meet. Without proper communication they were destined to fail.

Why had it taken so long for her to realize that?

Knowing that she couldn't sleep, Lauren got up from the bed and put on her dressing gown and house shoes. Esther was starting to drift off and Lauren said a prayer that her daughter would fall asleep without incident. Tiptoeing out of the room, she snuck downstairs, gingerly stepping on the wooden stairs, lest she wake up the baby.

As her feet reached the solid flooring of the bottom level of the townhouse, she released her breath and made her way to the small room in the back of the house. Jonah had carved out a room, so she had a private space, like the sitting rooms in Philadelphia. She could receive visitors, sew, and read without being disturbed.

Thinking about it now, she realized just how silly the whole idea was. In fact, having a small room specifically for visiting, sewing, and reading was just about the stupidest idea ever. It meant keeping another fireplace going in winter. It meant spending time apart when Lauren longed to be with her husband.

She had brought some books with her when she came from Philadelphia, but Jonah didn't know how to read very well. Most evenings he preferred that she read from the scriptures instead of some of the books she brought with her from home.

Over time she was scornful of Jonas lack of wanting to read other things besides the Bible. It wasn't until after his death that she understood he knew most of the verses that she read by heart because he couldn't read as well as she could.

Her hands shook as she picked up the large Bible and caressed it with gentle fingers. What she wouldn't give to read the scriptures to Jonah now.

How many mistakes had she made with her husband?

*So many of them.* Could she ever be forgiven?

She pulled the lamp closer to her and adjusted the wick, so the room filled with a soft glow. Opening the heavy leather cover, she turned the onionskin paper until she found the book of Psalms and began to read Jonah's favorite verse. "The Lord is my shepherd..."



Lauren had just finished feeding Esther and was changing her nappy when there was a brisk knock on the door. Checking the watch pinned to her blouse she frowned. Christopher was later that normal.

She lifted Esther to her shoulder and patted the baby's back as she walked to door. Opening it, she was surprised to see several of the town's women, including Heather and Altar standing there. Her throat thickened as she noticed they carried buckets, brooms and cleaning rags.

Heather gave her a quick hug. "Good morning, Lauren. We're here to help."

*Dr. Spaulding hadn't wasted any time, did he?*

Lauren pulled the door back and let the women in. "I'm so sorry that you have to see such mess."

"Oh please!" Altar Laingsburg said, casting an eye around the house. "When Omega and Alpha were born, I needed all the help I could get. I'm glad I could return the favor so many have done for me."

Not only had the women brought their cleaning supplies, but several had made dishes of food, as well as nappies and baby clothes for Esther. Lauren looked around at the women and was overcome with emotion. "I can't thank you enough for your kindness."

She felt Heather pull her close and rub her shoulder. "I wish you had told me, Lauren. I would have wanted to help you. Do you know that?"

At the kindness in Heather's blue eyes, Lauren felt ashamed. "I know that now."

"Why don't you make some coffee, and we'll get everything tidied up?"

Lauren went to the stove to make coffee, but Esther was overstimulated by the number of women in the house.

"May I hold her?" a woman Lauren didn't recognize asked.

"Thank you. I'm afraid I'm not very good with her." Lauren handed Esther to the woman.

"Nonsense," the woman said, bouncing Esther up and down. "It takes a while."

Lauren added fresh coffee to the pot and filled it with water. "Do you have any children?" she asked.

"I have five."

"Five?"

"Aye. My husband wanted to have an even dozen."

"How can you manage five?"

"It gets easier the more you have. The first one is always the most difficult. Come on, little one, let's get you passed around. There are a lot of ladies that would love to hold a baby."

Lauren watched as the woman walked over and handed Esther to another woman, who pulled a wooden rattle from her pocket. Esther watched wide eyed as wooden rings moved back on a handle.

*Why hadn't she thought of that?*

She would have to see what was available at the mercantile the next time she went.

With so many women there, they made quick work of getting the house back into order. Soon the rubbish was in containers to be disposed of. Nappies were soaking in buckets to be washed. The floor was swept, the rugs were beaten, and everything had been dusted or wiped down. Even the dishes were washed, and the wood box was filled.

Lauren couldn't believe that it took less than two hours for them to clean the entire house.

"Tell me," Heather said a bit later as the women settled around the table, eating from one of the many dishes that had been brought along, "When you are experiencing the melancholy, what are you feeling?"

Lauren glanced at her friend, and then at the women around the table. Even though Heather spoke softly, she was embarrassed if anyone should hear them speak. Lauren learned that the woman with



five children was named Charity Greene, and she was holding Esther again. Esther wrinkled her face as Charity made silly faces at the child.

Either the baby was annoyed, amused or about to make a mess.

Lauren finally turned back to Heather, her back to the rest of the women. She didn't want anyone listening to what she was about to say.

"I can't say for sure, Heather. There are times when Esther is crying, and I cannot move. No matter how much I want to comfort her. It's as if I am wearing water-soaked clothing and they are so heavy I can't lift my legs. Then, I get angry at her when she cries. I don't mean to," she said quickly to Heather, who nodded. "I just get so upset that she's crying, and I want her to stop. I know there is nothing wrong with her. It's just so loud."

"I see," Heather said. Her head dipped down. "I can't begin to understand as I am not a mother. From what others have said, when you get the melancholy, you're supposed to get a lot of fresh air, walk, and it will help."

"I've tried that," Lauren said sadly. "I was walking when..." She paused, anxious to not reveal the reason she was at the riverbank.

"When what?" Heather held her gaze intently, her blue eyes compelling her to speak.

"Nothing." Lauren pulled her gaze away. "The walking and fresh air sometimes help but at times they don't. I don't know what to do."

Heather tapped her chin. "I think you should get some help, Lauren."

"Help? What kind of help?"

"Someone who can come in and do some of the housework for you."

Lauren swallowed. "But Jonah always said I should be able to do these things myself."

Heather lifted her brow. "Can you?"

Shamefully, Lauren shook her head. In five years, she had yet to improve in the areas of strength these other women had. She could barely cook. Thankfully, she knew how to boil water and eggs.

"Then, you need to see if you can hire someone. Someone who can do the housework for you a couple times of week."

"If I were in Philadelphia, it would be easy to do that. But I'm in here in Last Chance. No one would have time to take care of my home as well as their own."

Heather shrugged. "You won't know unless you advertise."

As she thought about, she knew she liked the sound of the idea. "I wouldn't need help every day. I don't have a large mansion like we had back home. Just a little help would go far."

"Of course, it will. Or find someone who can live with you and help with the baby as well. Maybe an older woman."

"Hmmm," Lauren said, tapping her finger on her cheek. "I didn't think of that. Maybe like a grandmother for Esther."

"Exactly. She could even teach you how to keep house."

"That's an excellent idea. I'll have to think about that."

The rest of the afternoon flew by. The women stayed to visit, and some had brought knitting, sewing and embroidery to pass the time as they chatted. Lauren felt flush with excitement. Jonah hadn't wanted to entertain often, but she'd always enjoyed the company of others. She didn't realize how much she missed it.

By the time the women left, she felt so much better than before. Esther had been thoroughly spoiled and cossetted, and thus, when she changed her nappy for the last time and fed her, she dropped off to sleep soon after.

As Lauren lay down, thinking about the success of the day, she regretted only one thing.

Dr. Spaulding hadn't come to see her today.



## CHAPTER EIGHT



Christopher smashed his fist against the wall of the stall, the coarse wood scraping his knuckles. He was too late to save the cow, but there was a chance he could save the calf.

He was called to Widow Bank's farm in the early evening hours because her cow was having trouble delivering and wouldn't get up from its side. It had been nearly twenty-four hours and the calf still hadn't appeared.

Inserting his hand, he felt for the umbilical cord. There was a faint pulse.

"We don't have much time."

He walked around the large animal and placed his stethoscope against the animal's neck to listen to its pulse. It was weak and starting to fade. "Do you know when she went into labor?"

"Think it was yesterday," one of the farmhands chimed in. He was a grizzled as Widow Banks.

Christopher nodded. "I need you to get your shotgun. We are going to have to euthanize the dam and I'm going to cut the calf out."

"What?" Widow Banks was mortified.

"Ma'am, your cow isn't going to live much longer. There is still a pulse going to the calf, which means it is alive. It can't get out of the birth canal and its momma doesn't have the strength to push it." He wiped his forehead on his sleeve. "I can either save the calf, or you can lose both of them."

Widow Banks nodded and the man left, headed towards the house. "Poor Bossy," she said, smacking her gums.

Christopher put on a leather apron and pulled out his surgical instruments which were wrapped tightly in muslin. He had been taught to do it in medical school, so it carried over to his animal practice. Pulling out a small bottle of alcohol, he drenched the muslin and then unwrapped each instrument.

He figured he would have approximately two minutes to remove the cow and break the sac. The man returned with a single-shot rifle. Knowing the cow would panic once she spied the firearm, Christopher placed a blanket over its eyes.

"You want to do it right here." He pointed to an area just in front

of the ear. "It will be an instant kill; she won't feel any pain." Euthanasia was a horrible part of his job, but it was necessary for some instances.

The smell of sulfur filled the air, and the deed was done. Christopher worked quickly to free the calf from its mother's belly. Cutting through layers of muscle and fat, he spied the water sac and was careful not to nick it. Once the opening was large enough, he reached in and pulled the calf out in a slick puddle of fluid and blood.

"I need to get the sack off its nose," he said, tossing his instruments back on the muslin. Using his fingers, he broke the sack around the calf's face and ran his fingers through its mouth. The calf didn't respond. "I need some towels. Quickly!"

Widow Banks ran to the side of the barn and returned with a handful of dirty rags. Christopher started cleaning the calf, rubbing vigorously to help the circulation.

"It's not breathing."

"Move back," Christopher said. "I'm going to try something." He recalled his friend shaking calves like doctors did babies when they didn't cry after birth. Picking the calf up by the hind legs, he gave it two good shakes before placing it down on the ground. Fluid expelled from its lungs and a high-pitched bawl filled the air. Christopher sighed in relief. "Looks like you have a heifer calf."

He looked over his shoulder at the tiny woman, he saw a single tear on her papery thin cheek. She must be nearly seventy years old. How she lived so long was remarkable. Once again, though, he felt sick to his stomach that he couldn't save her cow.

"Looks like a fine strong calf," she said as they watched the calf stand on wobbly legs.

"I'm sorry about Bossy," he said softly. The cow was the widow's only source of income.

*And now it was gone.*

Widow Banks shook her head, and then patted him on the back of his shoulder. "Dr. Spaulding, you did the very best you could. No one worked as hard as you to try to save old Bossy." The bovine provided her with milk which she could use to make butter and cheese. She could sell those products in town. To produce, milk, however, the cow needed to calve. Christopher let her know that the cow was too old to consider breeding, but Widow Banks insisted that this would be the last time and that she would raise a calf to take Bossy's place. "At least I have this baby now."

"Since you don't have any other cows, I need to find a cow to nurse her," he told her as he stepped away from the dead cow. Hay

mixed with red and other fluids from the ruptured sac and afterbirth. "I can take the calf over to the Taylors. They are just up the road and have a nursing mother right now."

"Will I get her back."

"As soon as she is old enough to eat and drink on her own. I'll make sure of it. Do you have a name for her?"

Widow Banks thought for a moment. "I'll call her Bossy, too."

"That's a fine name. We need to get the carcass taken care of. The scent of blood will draw every wildcat in the area to the farm. Wolves too."

"I'll take care of it," the farmhand said.

"Be sure to bury or burn the straw," he warned them. He removed his leather apron. "Would it be alright if I rinsed everything at your water pump?"

"Of course. It is right over there."

Once his apron was washed, he washed his instruments and rolled them up in the leather. He'd dry them once he returned to his room at the livery. He tied the wet apron to the back of his saddle and went to retrieve his doctoring bag.

Widow Banks was busy hitching a horse to a small cart. "Hank will go with you to Missus Taylor's. The calf can ride in this." She patted the side of the cart. It was filled with straw. Hank laid the calf on its side and quickly tied its legs before placing it in the cart.

Christopher was grateful because he didn't want to be carrying a calf on his lap.

"Again, Mrs. Banks, I'm so sorry about Bossy."

"Dr. Spaulding, I said I don't blame you none. I just don't know what I am going to do."

"I will go visit the pastor on your behalf and see if the community can assist with your needs."

Widow Banks smiled at him. "That is right kind of you, doctor. I can't always get into town, so I appreciate you doing that for me."

The ride to the Taylor farm was short, and they were more than gracious to foster the calf. Christopher watched as they placed the calf near the barnyard. As soon as it started bleating, several of the mother cows called back. One walked over and sniffed the calf before licking it. He smiled because he knew the calf would be taken care of by the herd.

"Won't you stay for supper, Doc?" Millie asked once the herd moved into the large barn.

"Thank you, but no. I need to get home. It has been a long night; I

have one more stop to make, and I need to get home. I appreciate the offer, though.” He waved his goodbyes and headed towards the path that would take him by the river.

The water had receded and was moving calmly along the shore. What a difference since the last time he was there. He forgot to ask Millie if the women had a chance to visit Lauren yet. On his way home he visited the parish and spoke to the pastor's sister about what occurred at the widow's farm. Bea said she would reach out to the community and see what they could do for her. That lifted his spirits. People in Last Chance cared about each other. They stepped up when someone needed assistance.

He was glad that although he didn't get married in this town, he had relocated to a place that looked after their fellow man. By the time he returned to the livery and settled his horse for the evening, he was bone tired.

He longed to go see how Lauren was doing. He missed seeing her today, but she wasn't far from his thoughts. He wondered if she would like to see the calf. Perhaps he could talk her into going for a ride after church to see it.

Mostly, he wanted to look in her face, stare into those eyes and make certain that she was in good health.

*In good health?* Good heavens, man! She wasn't a bovine.

His mind echoed that sentiment, bringing forth an image of her in supposed finery. Ever since she told him about her life in Philadelphia, he was beset by wishful thinking of seeing her in elegant gowns hosting a function of some sort. It wouldn't matter where the venue would be because whatever place she graced would be blessed by her appearance.,

Christopher thought his cheeks would burst into flames. *Why was he thinking like that?*

He recalled the way she fit perfectly in his arms when she cried, releasing some of the pain locked inside of her. He was pleased that she found comfort in him, and he wanted to make sure she didn't suffer anymore.

Grabbing a bar of soap, he needed to clean himself from the filth of his occupation. He pumped cold water in a bucket and carried it over to a wooden tub in the corner of his room. It took several trips to fill the tub. He would have preferred hot water, but there wasn't a means to heat it, and he wasn't about to ask Dave at this late hour. As he filled the tub his mind drifted back to Lauren.

He thought as to why he had answered a mail-order groom ad in the newspaper. He could continue to lie to himself that it was only to get out of Virginia, which wasn't a lie but perhaps there was more to it

than that. Though he wasn't upset that Millie had chosen to marry another man, but he still felt a small hint of disappointment that he wasn't married. He was 34 years old now. It was time to settle and start a family.

But how could he find a wife who will understand his work with animals? Who would not consider him to be a quack? Christopher got into the cold water and sat with his knees up to his chin in the wooden tub. A shiver ran up his spine, so he grabbed the soap and started to wash.

When he mentioned his occupation to Lauren, she hadn't laughed at him, and she seemed genuinely interested in what he had to say. *Was that a good sign?* Or was she simply being a good hostess? Christopher just didn't know. People were so complicated.

Animals weren't as complicated even though they couldn't talk. You could develop a relationship with them, and they simply wanted you to care for them back. With an animal, you knew just what to expect.

He could still remember how soft she felt in his arms. No animal fur or hair could compare to that sensation. As he got into clean clothes, he had just enough strength to crawl into his bed. The last thought before he shut his eyes were of a pair of kissable lips. He whispered her name as he drifted off to sleep and wondered if those lips would taste as sweet in real life, as they would in his dreams.





## CHAPTER NINE



“Brothers and sisters, let us pray.”

So ended the Sunday Service at church. Lauren was glad for once. Pastor Collins tended to preach a lot of hellfire and brimstone. She already had enough guilt to last a lifetime and she didn’t want to be reminded every Sunday about her sins.

Today, though, he seemed distracted. Several times during the message, he paused and then continued as if something other than the word of God weighed on his mind. When a few of the members gave discreet coughs, he’d jumped and thumped on the podium, going right back into the message as if he hadn’t stopped.

He did that several times during the service, and she wondered what could be distracting him. Pastor Collins had something on his mind. He was a hard man to feel sympathy for. She did recall how concerned he was when Christopher stopped her from going into the riverbank. Perhaps there was a softer side to the man. She let out a sharp cough, causing a few parishioners to turn to look at her. Murmuring her apologies, she tried to listen to the rest of the services with a reverent heart.

As everyone filed out of the church, a few of the women who had come to help her with the house came forward. They wanted to fawn over Esther once more, and Esther thoroughly enjoyed the attention. With a sigh of relief, she let one of the women take the child and Lauren slipped out the doors of the church to take in some fresh air. She stood at the bottom of the steps, her eyes closed, and lifted her face to the sky. The sun warmed her face and she smiled, basking in the glow. Her silence was disrupted when she heard her name being called.

“Mrs. Hale?”

She recognized that voice without having to turn around. When she pivoted around, she saw Christopher standing before her. “Dr. Spaulding. Did you enjoy the services?”

“Very much so. Pastor Collins is very...” he paused as if looking for the word to adequately describe the

“... enthusiastic?” she offered.

He smiled, and she felt a fluttering inside. “Yes, enthusiastic is a

good word. How are you this morning?"

"I'm well, thank you. And you?"

"I am good." He looked around at the people that were starting to come out of the church. "May I speak with you for a moment?"

She looked past his broad shoulder to see that Esther was surrounded by a group of women at the top of the steps. There were a few older girls who wanted to see the baby as well. Heather was there, waving Esther's hand back and forth. Lauren lifted her hand to catch Heather's eye and pointed to the area next to the church. With a deliberate dart between her and Christopher, Heather nodded.

"Sure. Let's go over there."

The fresh air stirred the wisps of hair along her temples as she basked in the sunlight. "It is a lovely day," she said. Goodness, she hadn't felt so well in a long time.

"You're looking well," Christopher said.

Her head dipped down. "Thank you." She patted surreptitiously at her head. "You wanted to speak with me, Dr. Spaulding?"

"I think, Lauren, we've shared enough secrets for you to call me by my Christian name."

His blue eyes stared down into her, the color almost rivaling the brightness of the morning sky above them. "Christopher," she said. "You wanted to speak to me?"

"I did. I wanted to know if I could take you to Mrs. Taylor's home. There's a new calf I helped deliver that I want you to see."

Lauren wanted to see it. Or, rather, she wanted to be with Christopher. "I'd love to. Thank you for thinking of me."

He nodded. "I thought you would enjoy it."

"I think I would. Let me get Esther and then we'll be on our way."

A few moments later, they were in Christopher's two-seater buggy, Esther snugly secured in her basket as they traveled the short distance to Millie's house. They didn't talk too much, but a comfortable silence was between them.

Even Esther wasn't as fussy. She looked at the branches overhead and shadows of the trees as they passed, her tiny eyes soaking in every part of the new world for her.

Whenever her daughter was like this, Lauren loved her very much. She loved Esther when she was crying as well, it was just harder for her to feel motherly.

Clutching Esther's basket closer to her in the buggy seat, she wondered if she were a bad mother. Did other women feel the same sort of frustration and irritation with their children? Did they ever

want to be away from them? Esther gave her a toothless grin and blew bubbles as she waved her hand in the air.

Lauren leaned down and kissed Esther's fingertips. Her baby looked so much like Jonah, it hurt her heart. Even though the pain was there, part of her was so glad that she did have Esther.

They soon arrived at Millie's home. The family was unloading from their wagon and Mary Rose came running over to see Esther.

"May I carry her?" Mary Rose asked.

"No, you may not, young lady," Millie said. "It's my turn," the woman cooed as she practically yanked the basket from Lauren's hand. "I didn't get a chance to hold as long as I wanted to before Altar came and took her from me." She lifted Esther and handed the empty basket back to Lauren. "Hello, pumpkin."

Lauren grinned. "Altar loves children. She says she hopes she has ten."

"Good heavens! I hope she was joking."

"I don't think so." Lauren lifted her shoulder. She couldn't imagine wanting to have more than Esther. How the young black woman could want that many babies, was beyond her.

"Poor Wolfe," Millie murmured as she tucked Esther tight against her. "He already calls the twins his cubs. If he had eight more, he'd have to call them a pack."

They all laughed. Robert came over and shook Christopher's hand.

"I take it you're here to see how the calf is doing, Dr. Spaulding?"

He said that he was. "I wanted to show it to Mrs. Hale while it was still young. Calves grow rather quickly."

Robert took hold of Christopher's horse. "Yes, they do. I'll put your horse in the barn and come inside for coffee when you are ready."

Millie nodded. "While you're doing that, I'm going to play with this little one. Come on, Mary Rose."

As Millie and her daughter walked away, Lauren felt some tension leave her.

"Are you all right, Lauren?"

She looked up at Christopher. "I am. I want to thank you so much."

"What for?"

"You not only saved me from the water, but you saved me from my pride."

He held out his arm. "I don't think I saved you from anything. I believe the Lord wanted me to be there when you need Him, through me."

The thought so that made her pause. To think a woman like her

who had failed her husband and her marriage could still be known of God and that he would send a man like Christopher...

Thinking of Jonah's favorite verse, she found new comfort in that. "The Lord is my Shepherd..."

From what she knew of such things, a shepherd took care of his sheep and didn't let anything come after it and take it from its grasp.

Not even when then had sheep self-destructive tendencies.

She swallowed a lump that formed in her throat. It was almost overwhelming to think of it. "You're very kind," she said after a moment.

They walked in comfortable silence along the path to the far pen where the calf was contained with several other animals. Its coat had an almost reddish hue to it. It looked at them with large eyes before turning on spindly legs and started drinking greedily from its mother's teat.

"Aren't they beautiful," Lauren sighed. "Is it a girl?" Christopher nodded. "Mother and daughter are doing wonderful."

"That's not her mother."

Lauren turned to him. "What do you mean?"

A look of pain crossed his features. "I had to euthanize the mother. She was too old to be bred. I told the Widow Banks that, but she had to do it because the cow brought her the only money she had. But the heifer didn't have any more strength to bring the calf into the world. I had to choose to save the calf or lose them both."

"Oh, Christopher." She reached out and patted his hand that rested on top of the wooden fence.

"It's always difficult to make decisions like that. I tried with everything within me to save them both. But I couldn't."

"You tried," she said. "You tried."

She knew they were speaking of the cow and its calf, but she couldn't help but see the parallel between herself and Jonah.

Had her marriage been as much of a failure as she made it out to be?

Goodness, she did try to live up to Jonah's expectations of their marriage. In retrospect, he had done the same thing for her. When she complained about not having some trinket or other, he would do what he could to reproduce it.

Their marriage had not been perfect. *Was any marriage?* But they tried.

Perhaps if Jonah had lived, they would have made it a better marriage. Even when they were their angriest at each other, she never

thought of leaving him. She'd love Jonah and she knew he loved her. Maybe that love would have seen themselves to a better togetherness.

She would never know now. In those moments watching the calf drink from a mother that wasn't its own, some of the guilt she'd carried lifted from her shoulders.

"Christopher, why did you want to be an animal doctor?"

He glanced sharply at her, a hint of distrust in his eyes. Alarmed by his look, she asked, "Is something wrong? Do you not want to talk about your work?"

Still, Christopher said nothing, and then, without answering her question, he launched into the reasons why. She found it very interesting, asking questions as he told her. The time seemed to stand still as they talked. He had a wonderful voice, low and calming. She could understand how some wounded animal would respond to that reassurance.

She found herself laughing at some of the things he told her of the animals he cared for.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" he finally asked her. As they talked by the pen, they had moved closer together, unaware of the distance until she nearly bumped into him.

She should feel some sort of uneasiness.

Instead, she felt anticipation. For those wonderful eyes of his had darkened.

"I am," she said breathlessly. "You make it sound so interesting."

"It's easy when you have such a captivating audience." He reached out and touched her cheek. "Or when you're simply captivated by the audience."

The air stilled around them, humming with a different kind of tension. Christopher did nothing more than stroke the edge of her cheek, but it sent wonderful sensations along her nerve endings.

"I want to kiss you, Lauren."

"I want you to kiss me," she whispered. "Is that very wicked of me?"

Christopher seemed to think it over. "I won't ever take liberties, Lauren."

Was it too soon to feel this way about Christopher? Was the fact that she was making her an unfaithful wife? If not to Jonah as a husband, but his memory?

But if Jonah were alive, she wouldn't be here at this moment. After all, she never had any wayward thoughts about any other man. She had wanted to live in Philadelphia with her husband, not away from him.

And didn't Pastor Collins force the widows to get married again? A man as strict about displaying righteousness couldn't think that it was wrong to marry another man.

With that sound argument worked through in her mind, she said, "I'd very much like you to kiss me, Christopher."





## CHAPTER TEN



Christopher hadn't expected this when he wanted to show her the calf. Throughout the service, he'd wanted to be with Lauren and bask in her presence.

Now, it took all his strength to control himself. *What had made him so blunt with her?* The answer came – Lauren had to hide her true desires with her husband. He didn't want her to do that with him.

Today was the first time he'd seen her dressed up well. She wore a rose-colored skirt and a very feminine white blouse, lacy and detailed. How elegant she looked as she sat in the church with the other members. He was glad he hadn't been facing her. If he had, he wouldn't have been able to look at anyone else but her.

"Aren't you going to kiss me, Christopher?"

He sucked in a breath. "There's nothing I'd like to do more," he admitted. "But I feel as if I am trying to rush you into something you are not prepared for."

She tilted her head to the side. "I did say I wanted you to kiss me, didn't I?"

The cords of his throat tightened. "You did."

"Then I must know what I want."

Still, he hesitated. Though Lauren was on the mend, he didn't want to rush her. "Are you certain?"

"Oh you," she said impatiently. Her arms wound up around his neck and she lifted her lips towards mouth to his.

Christopher heard a small murmur leave her mouth as their lips met. Her actions spoke louder than words. And her actions told him she did want him to kiss her. Within a heartbeat, he wrapped his arm around her, feeling the slenderness of her body against his own. A wild elation ricocheted through him as their lips met in a gentle joining. His arms tightened on their own accord, but she didn't shrink from him.

How long they stood there, he didn't know. If an earthquake had shaken the ground, he wouldn't have been aware of it. All he could focus on was the sweetness of their shared kiss as well as his feelings which were deeper than he'd realized. He didn't want the moment to end. If he could find a bottle, and place this moment in it, he would.

Then, whenever he wished to relive it, he'd take out the bottle and pour it out.

But that was the thing of childhood daydreams. And yes, Lauren made him feel like a young boy again.

She pulled away from him, and he let her, albeit reluctantly.

"Thank you," she said.

"I believe I'm supposed to be saying that."

A light delicate color washed over her face. "Rose Red," he said under his breath. "You're aptly named."

She dipped her head shyly. "We should probably get back to the house with Millie. I'm sure Esther has probably made her want to pull her hair out."

As it was, Millie and her family had doted on the small baby, looking up in shock when they came into the house. The visit went on pleasantly as they had coffee and cake and discussed cattle and horses.

Christopher watched as Lauren's face remained happy. She enjoyed the company. Loved being around others. It was as if she found delight in people, which translated to patience with Esther.

She wasn't meant to be a carpenter's wife, although she had tried her best. Her husband was in his studio building furniture around the clock and she was alone in the house. It didn't bode well for a woman that thrived on interaction.

He thought of what she told him about her husband Jonah. The man did care about her, there was no doubt about that. Nor did she have the signs of abuse some women experienced from men who treated them as property. Jonah hadn't been a bad husband, and Christopher didn't blame the man for his expectations of marriage. The blame was in Jonah's foolishness for trying to make Lauren the wife he wanted instead of the woman he married.

Using his own experience, Christopher learned to reject what people expected him to be. When he gave up being a doctor, so many had been against him.

If, and he was only thinking if, there was a chance to have Lauren... as... as...

A jolt went down his back. *What was he thinking?*

Soon they said goodbye and headed back towards Lauren's house.

The ride back to Lauren's house was quiet except for Esther's fussing. She was sleepy, Lauren told him and bound to be cranky. He liked the way she seemed to be reading her daughter's moods as opposed to being frustrated. That was certainly a good sign.

He escorted her into the house and waited as she changed the child's nappy and dressed her in clean clothes. The house he noted,

had signs of disarray again and he grinned. Cleaning was not Lauren's strong point. He didn't see it as a sign of laziness, but rather a sign of being overwhelmed with responsibility.

She needed help and he wanted to be the one to do it.

"Thank you," Lauren said as she saw him out the door. There was a definite sparkle in her eyes. "For everything."

"Including my kiss?" he said, wondering at his audacity but unable to stop himself from saying it.

"Especially that."

She reached up and planted a kiss on his cheek. He wanted to turn and fit his mouth to her again but decided to let this happen the way she wanted it to happen. So, he took her chaste kiss with him on the way home and cuddled it as he went to sleep.

The next morning, he was getting dressed for the day's duties when he heard a small knock at his door. He frowned. *Was it Lauren?* Had something happened?

Going over to the door, he opened, and his mouth opened. There in the doorway, stood a tall, stolid middle-aged woman, with pale skin, a pinched face, and hard gray eyes that looked him over.

"Mrs. McCallister?" He hadn't seen the woman in years. "What are you doing here?"

Her fingers tightened around her reticule. "It's me, Christopher. May I come in?"

"Yes. Yes of course." He stood aside to allow her entry into the small room he rented at the back of the livery stable. There wasn't much to his room. Just a bed with a mattress, a small chest for his belonging, and a rough table with a few items scattered on top. The faint smell of sweet straw and manure filled the room.

She wrinkled her nose as she entered the room. As he closed the door, he could not prevent feeling uneasy about this visit. "Mrs. McAllister, what's going on? What's wrong?"

She'd brought a hard-sided traveling case with her, and she placed it on the floor, using it as a seat as she faced him. Christopher recalled she wasn't the warmest of women, but she did love his mother and took care of her. Something was distressing Mrs. McAllister and all sorts of horrible thoughts ran through his mind.

Though her gray eyes were still hard, they held a sheen of sadness in them. She took a deep breath and wiped away a tear with a lace-covered hand. "I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Christopher. But your mother has passed away."

The floor fell from under his feet. He leaned against the wall for strength. "Surely you jest." There wouldn't be any reason the old

woman would travel across the country to lie bout his mother, but he couldn't believe it. His mother couldn't be dead. She couldn't be.

"It is no joking matter, Christopher. And I'm afraid it doesn't get any better." She pulled out an envelope and handed it to him. "Mr. Kernel asked me to deliver this to you."

Christopher took the envelope from her and looked at the typeset in the corner. It was from his father's attorney. What could Mr. Kernel want?



When Lauren opened the door two days later, she couldn't prevent the wild smile that crossed her face. She was happy to see that it was Christopher standing before her.

*Oh, how she had missed him.*

Warmth flooded her cheeks as she admitted that to herself. Everything inside of her clenched in response to his nearness. She remembered her forwardness when she kissed him so brazenly. What could she say? He made her feel like her old self. The self that was a bit daring and outrageous but always within the boundaries of respectful behavior.

Were her eyes sparkling as she took him in? *She didn't know.*

She had come to rely upon his visits. Before any of the women in town stopped by to support her, he was already there. Fighting her demons and making sure she was safe. Before he even knew her name, he had snatched her back from making a massive mistake, one that she would not have been able to correct

The women of Last Chance were helpful, and she was grateful to them for their kindness and support.

Christopher, however, was the one whom God had used to give her a second chance.

Wait!

*What about poor Jonah?*

Was being happy wrong?

Jonah had been gone since September. In a few months, he would be gone for almost a year. Was that too short of time to mourn for a man she had wronged?

Swiftly she sent that through scurrying to the back of her mind. Jonah was dead. She wasn't being unfaithful to his memory. Goodness knew she wasn't going to marry the good doctor any time soon.

She clasped her hands together in front of her.

"Hello, Christopher. How are you? I haven't seen you in a couple of days."

Waiting for his response, she peered up into his face. Alarm grew within her, replacing the happy feeling that had come over her.

This did not look like the man who rescued her that fateful day from the riverbank. Nor did he look like the man who had drawn her into his arms and waded past her pride to unearth the pain she buried. He didn't look anywhere near the man who had allowed her to kiss him that day in Millie's pasture.

That man looked confident, brave, and capable.

The one before her now, though he had the same face, was working under powerful devastation.

His face was haggard as if he had been through or heard something terrible. Dark circles colored underneath his eyes. Tufts of blonde hair splayed out in different directions. It was an abhorrence to his usual polished and pressed neat self.

She pulled the door open and waved him inside. "Christopher, come inside."

He moved about as if he were some lifeless bodies simply reanimated by lightning as recounted in that terrifying novel of Frankenstein's monster.

His sluggish movements gave credence to the idea as she assessed him. When he turned back around, Lauren gasped. His eyes, which were normally filled with life, were so dark and turbulent, her heart sunk in reaction.

Lowly and bland, he said without preamble, "Lauren, my mother is dead."

She gasped and sat across from him at the table. Without thinking anything about it, she reached over and grabbed one of his hands and wrapped it in both of hers. "Oh, Christopher. What happened?"

He leaned forward. "My mother's housekeeper, Mrs. McAllister, came to see me two days ago. My mother fell down the stairs and broke her neck."

Her hands lifted to her throat. "Oh, my word. I am so sorry to hear that."

"According to Mrs. McAllister, she died instantly. From the doctor who looked her over, there wasn't any pain to be felt. That is a Godsend." Lauren remained quiet and let him continue. "There is much more to the story of my mother's death."

"In what way?"

His long pointer finger pulled from her grasp and tapped absently on top of her knuckles. "My mother has a brother. A horrible man who is nothing more than a vagabond and a cheat. Although my inheritance is supposed to come to me, my uncle is contesting the will."

I received a letter from my father's attorney letting me know I have thirty days to comply with the terms of the will or forfeit my inheritance."

"On what grounds?"

"When I first came here, I came to find a wife to receive my inheritance from my father. It wasn't necessary, but it made sense. The opportunity was there, and I needed a change."

Her nose wrinkled. "I seem to recall that. You were originally going to marry Millie, but she ended up marrying someone else."

Christopher nodded wearily. "That is correct. I was fine with the state of circumstances because I knew that my inheritance would come to me before long."

He heaved a heavy sigh. "It seems as if my uncle, who was my last living relative is pestering the lawyer to sign my inheritance over to him as I have not filled the stipulations of the will itself. That I must be married by the time I reach thirty-five or before my mother's death."

"Why would she do that?"

"It wasn't my mother, but my father's idea. He felt that all young men should be married by the time they were in their mid-thirties. As I had used most of my youth to pursue my medical studies and then change that to helping animals, I never felt particularly compelled to marry for the sake of marriage itself."

Her mouth twisted.

An incredulous note entered his voice. "Did I say something funny?"

His eyes resembled thin slits and she hastily assured him that he had not. "It is not something you said. Rather I recalled something my sister said."

"Your sister? Snow White, you mean?"

She nodded. "She told me once that contrary to popular belief, most men wish to marry sooner than women because they want to make sure they have a young girl who will be obedient to their rule."

"Your sister is a very cynical person. Does she have reason to be?"

Lauren realized what he was doing. He was trying to distract himself from his thoughts. Well did she understand how he felt and so she gave him what he once gave her.

*Distraction. Blessed distraction.*

"I'm not certain. Growing up, we had a wonderful childhood with doting parents and servants that made sure we were aware of who we were in high society. We've both had beaux and have been courted many times, but for some reason, my sister became a misandrist."

“A female who dislikes men,” He murmured. “But she continues to be courted by men, doesn’t she?”

“Yes, but she does it as a game to herself. She’s very beautiful, my sister.”

“She can’t be more beautiful than you.”

Christopher still gazed steadily at her, and she realized with a start that he had no idea he’d spoken his thoughts out loud. Should she call his attention to it or keep going?

Deciding to keep going, she said. “Well, she hates men and yet, she likes to lord her powerful beauty over them. Many had come to her, thinking they would be the one to bring the Snow White from the cold lonely woods, not understanding that my sister enjoys those cold lonely woods.”

“I see.”

“Not to sound vulgar, Christopher but what exactly is your inheritance?”

“My father left—” He paused and then grabbed both of her hands. “Lauren, you can help me. You can be my wife.”





## CHAPTER ELEVEN



The moment the words were out of his mouth, Christopher knew they were the right ones.

He had spent the past two days since receiving the terrible news about his mother walking around in a stupor. It was hard to believe that his mother was no longer in this world; and that she met such a violent death.

What hurt his heart most was he didn't know if she was proud of him in any regard. Granted she laughed, initially, but was she at least proud of him? There was nothing he could do about it now.

He was grateful that Mrs. McAllister traveled all the way to tell him the terrible news, but now, she had nowhere to go. She appealed to Christopher's uncle to no avail. Even after many years of faithful service to the family, the uncle turned her away. With no living relatives, she pleaded her case to Christopher.

*What was she supposed to do with her life now?* he thought.

It wasn't easy to find a position when you were over forty. Most families already had housekeepers that had been with them for years. She didn't have any family to live with. She was truly alone.

Fortunately, during his two days of pacing the town's streets, an idea came to him, and he couldn't wait to share it with Lauren. That was if she would answer his question. When the words asking Lauren to be his wife slipped past his lips, he knew they were the right ones. He knew in that instant, that she was what he wanted. Lauren and baby Esther. To take care of forever. Now, the suspense was eating him up inside.

*Why was she taking so long to answer?*

Lauren looked at him as if he were growing a horn out of his head. "Are you out of your mind, Christopher?"

"I am quite serious about this Lauren. My father's will stipulates that if I marry, I can claim my full inheritance. That wasn't an issue while my mother was alive, I didn't need it. Now that she is gone, my uncle will be able to claim the money and keep it for himself." He ran his hand down his face. "I know it may seem like a drop in the bucket compared to where you are from in Philadelphia, but that money will do a world of good here in Last Chance. I'd rather see it be used here

than to be wasted back east.”

“What exactly is your inheritance?”

He cleared his throat. It sounded arrogant to even say the amount out loud. “Fifteen thousand dollars.”

Lauren blinked rapidly and her mouth widened. “My goodness. That is a lot of money no matter where you are from.”

“My father invested in the first railroad many years ago. People laughed at him, but he knew an opportunity when he saw it.”

“Why didn’t you bring here when you came west? Or at least transfer it to the bank once you arrived?”

“That would make sense, for sure. However, the argument with my mother caused a rift between us.” He tugged on his pants, before sitting down in the chair. “She swore that I could not make it without my father’s inheritance. She wanted me to stay in Richmond and marry. Keep my medical practice there. Problem was, I was miserable. It wasn’t what I wanted.”

“I don’t know how I can help. Do you think that marrying me will further your situation?”

Christopher thought about her words. Was he asking her to help him? Or was he asking her to marry him?

*The difference was a significant one.*

One implied that he needed her in his life to maintain access to his due monies and continue materially living his life. The other suggested there was more to his proposal than even he recognized. When did that other part of him begin to explore a life with Lauren as his wife in every sense of the word?

*Was it when he had saved her life?*

No, it wasn’t at that moment.

It was when he saw her at the riverbank before she even took that first step and he saw her silhouette. Something inside of him came to life with a tiny spark and grew into what he was feeling at this moment.

And now he was asking her to marry him

Was it wrong for her to think he was asking her to marry him just to receive his inheritance? There was so much more to his request. Thinking about little Esther, something curled around his heart. In the two days he’d been away, he missed that baby more than he could imagine.

There was more to what he was offering her than just his inheritance. There was security and a home, help... maybe even love.

Could she see that when she looked at him? Could she believe that

there was more to him than just a piece of paper stating he was worth a significant amount of money if he was married?

Would she even marry him?

*Do you think that marrying me will further your situation?* Her words rang hollow in his ears.

“It will help me. But it will help both of us. I hope you realize that. Esther will have a future. She will be provided for. The best schools. The best of everything.”

She stood up and walked away from him. Her dress was neatly pressed, showing that she was feeling better about herself. Her hair was shiny and neatly pinned on top of her head with small pearls peeking out between the strands. Although she was dressed simply, she wore the clothes as though they were the finest silks.

“Would this be a marriage of convenience?”

That was not the response he was expecting.

Christopher's face burned. What was he supposed to say to that?

He had not thought that far ahead, even though he should have. He was currently concerned with crafting a response for the attorney back in Virginia. Of course, he was more than willing to make their marriage traditional, with all the intimacies associated with it.

But Lauren hadn't recovered from the terrible loss of her husband, and she was still dealing with the melancholy that childbirth brought on. He wouldn't force her into anything she didn't desire. He'd be content to be married in name only.

“I will never ask you to do anything that'll make you feel uncomfortable. I know you are still grieving for your husband. Right now, why don't we marry, so I can secure my... I mean, our future, and then if you want to discuss that part we can.”

He waited with bated breath as she staring off into space her arms wrapped around her waist.

“I'm a terrible mother, you know.”

Christopher stood moved behind her, laying his hands on her shoulders. “No, you aren't. Where is Esther?”

Lauren looked over her shoulder at him. “Millie took her this morning. I think Mary Rose likes playing big sister. It gave me a bit of a break and allowed me to take a bath. I feel human once more.”

“Lauren, you are allowed to need help.” Perhaps this was the moment he needed. “In fact, I had someone I wanted you to meet.”

Lauren turned around so she was facing him. “I don't know if I'm up to meeting anyone new.”

Christopher cupped her chin and dragged his finger across her

lower lip. How easy it would be to lower his head and kiss her like he had done in his dreams so many times before. But she deserved more than that. She deserved flowers, and gifts, and soft words.

“I think you’d like her.”

“Her?” He heard her voice rise. “You asked me to marry you and you want me to meet another woman?”

“It isn’t like that. Mrs. McAllister worked for my mother. She was an excellent housekeeper, and she loves children. I think she might be able to provide you so relief.” He watched emotions play across her face. How he wanted to see her happy. “Do you love Esther, Lauren?”

“With every breath in me. But she is always crying and making noise and there are times I don’t know what to do.”

“That’s okay. Maybe having someone teach you what you need to know will help you have a stronger bond with your baby. Plus, you’ll have someone to talk with during the day.”

“I can’t afford a housekeeper, Christopher. I can barely afford to feed myself. I was thinking of selling everything and going home.” She looked up at him with large eyes. “Why did you ask me if I loved Esther.”

“Because if you love her, then you will do everything you can to protect her. That is a mother’s instinct. I’ve seen it in humans and animals.”

Lauren bit her bottom lip. “Do you love her, Christopher?”

He felt his cheeks lift in a grin. “I do, Lauren. I love her very much.”

“What about me?”

He staggered backward as if she had punched him. “What?” He felt this was a trick question.

“Do you love me?”

“I care for you a great deal, Lauren. A great deal. I would like to think that it could turn into love quite easily.”

She rolled her shoulder as if shrugging off some invisible demon. “I love my daughter Christopher. And I thank God that you were there to save me that fateful day. I think God purposefully put you in my path because he knew you were just what I needed. This is my chance to repay the favor.”

He tugged at his collar. the last thing he wanted was her gratitude. “Lauren, you aren’t indebted to me...”

She placed her fingers against his lips. “Shh.” She moved her hand around to cup his cheek. “This is my way of saving your and your inheritance. Perhaps, even your livelihood, if you are going to open an animal clinic here in Last Chance. I want you to have the best animal

clinic anywhere west of the Mississippi. You hear me?"

"There is a school opening in Iowa for Veterinary medicine."

"Then we'll find a way for you to study there. Maybe we can split our time between locations."

"You'd do that?"

"Of course. I'd do anything for the man I love."

"You love me?" He tugged on her waist pulling her closer.

She nodded her head. "I think I do. If not, now, then I soon will. I think we have a chance to start again, Christopher. I would be proud to be your wife."

He lowered his head and captured her lips in a soft kiss. When they broke apart, he looked into her eyes and for the first time saw something there he longed to see.

*Happiness.*

"Let's not delay. We can go find Pastor Collins." He needed to get the papers signed so he could send a wire back to the attorney in Richmond.

"We need to get Esther."

"Of course. And you need to meet Mrs. McAllister."

"And we need to get your things from the livery. After all, this will be your home now."

Christopher smiled and spun her around. Their future looked bright.



## CHAPTER TWELVE



Lauren watched as Pastor Collin stared at them skeptically. For someone who was so fired up about the women in the town getting married, she expected more... excitement from him.

"Are you sure you both want to be married?" he asked.

"We do," she affirmed with a nod. Even saying the words felt strange to her. She wouldn't say that she was in love with Christopher. However, there was no doubt that she was well on her way to feeling a love greater than she could imagine.

She enjoyed the kiss that they had shared and wondered if ever they would do more than that. Tonight was going to be her wedding night.

Her feelings were so different from what she had experience with Jonah. With Jonah, she had been sucked away by her feelings. Cast upon the sea of emotionalism without the reality of who they were as individuals.

She didn't regret marrying Jonah and she had his daughter to remember him by. With Christopher, it was completely different. He was slow. Steady. Safe and secure.

Sometimes she thought of what Ruth had told her. That marriage was only meant to satisfy a man's desire. Maybe some of that was true in the case of her marriage to Jonah. But she sensed with innate female intuition that marriage to Christopher would be different.

That was something she was looking forward to.

"We can perform the marriage next month on—"

Christopher interjected, "Pastor Collins we need to be married sooner than that."

The minister looked at him with suspicious eyes. "Am I to take it that you have anticipated vows that did not belong to you?"

It took all her will not to roll her eyes at Pastor Collins's ever-present suspicions.

"Pastor Collins," Christopher said squinting his eye at the man. "My inheritance that I'm supposed to receive hinges on my married state. As Mrs. Hale is gracious enough to assist me in this matter by becoming my wife, I will have access to what rightfully belongs to me."

“Is that the only reason for the marriage?”

She almost wanted to hit the minister. The way he had gone around town, telling women to marry or get out of last Chance, she was irritated he dared to question their reasons.

However, before she could say anything, Christopher looked at her with special meaning only for her.

“Not at all, Pastor Collins,” Christopher said. “However, if we can get this resolved hastily, I see a rather nice donation for the new steeple soon. Perhaps even a brass bell?”

“A brass bell you say?”

“Bronze?” Lauren chimed in, ignoring the look Christopher gave her.

“Bronze?” The pastor moved towards the pulpit.

“Yes,” Christopher relented. “Bronze would be a good choice.”

The pastor cleared his throat. After he looked between them and seemed mollified by the offering, he raised his hands and said, “Very well.”

The ceremony was simple. Beatrice and Mrs. McAllister were the only witnesses.

When Pastor Collins said that Christopher could kiss the bride, Lauren lifted her chin in eager anticipation. Once the papers were signed, Christopher folded them and placed them in the breast pocket of his suit.

“Let’s go get Esther and then we can walk to the livery.”

As she walked along the streets towards Lisa’s home near the square, Lauren thought about the first time when she came to town. How she had such high expectations of being Jonah’s wife. Now she knew better, or at least she hoped she did.

When they collected Esther from Lisa’s house, Mrs. McAllister stepped right in to claim the baby. “Don’t you worry none, Missus Spaulding, I’ll take care of her like she’s my own grandchild.” The woven basket was rather awkward. Mrs. McAllister took Esther from the woven basket and put her directly on her shoulder, handing the carrier to Christopher. “You really should consider a perambulator. It makes it much easier to go for walks.”

On the way to the livery to collect Christopher’s belongings, they stopped at the mercantile to select a carriage from the catalog. Since they selected one that would be coming from San Francisco instead of New York, they could expect it a week sooner. That pleased Mrs. McAllister greatly.

Lauren enjoyed the short walk to the liver. Christopher reached over and took her hand in his, squeezing it to reassure her as they



kept walking along the street.

"Are you alright, Mrs. McAllister?" Lauren asked, looking over her shoulder.

Esther had fallen asleep on Mrs. McAllister's shoulder and a ribbon of drool dripped from the child's lip. She was still a formidable sight, but she had softened as she held the baby.

"She approves of you," Christopher whispered in her ear, sending shivers of delight down Lauren's spine.

As they approached the corner where the ferry office stood across from the livery, there was a commotion drawing their attention towards the docks. Lauren could see Dave, at the shore tugging on the rope to guide the ferry flush against the shore. A woman was holding on tight to one of the ropes that extended around the ferry platform, yelling at Dave. There wasn't any purpose for the ropes, other than to keep the horses from jumping into the river.

Suddenly the ferry lurched, and the woman went head first over the rope and fell into the water. Dave jumped in and grabbed the woman, pulling her shore. He must have said something because everything was deathly silent then a shriek rose over the crowd that had gathered as if some animal was being flailed alive.

A sodden woman with blonde hair plastered to her face raised her hand. "How dare you speak to me that way?" she demanded.

Dave's hand snapped out and grabbed the raised arm. "Watch yourself, lady. I will speak to you any way I wish when you are disrespectful to me."

"Ruth?" The blonde-haired woman whirled around and faced them. "Ruth? What are you doing here?"

"Who's this, Lauren?" Christopher asked.

"This is my sister."

Christopher gave her a knowing look. *Snow White had arrived.*

"Lauren!" She came running towards them, her damp clothes slapping against her. "I am so glad to see you." She pushed her wet hair out of her face. "I've come to take you back home." Lauren saw a scowl break out over Christopher's handsome features.

"Take me back home? I have no desire to go back home."

Ruth clasped her hands in a dignified way even though water trails cover the floor. "That is not the impression that you gave me. I still have your letter or at least I did before that ridiculous man," she glared at the livery owner, "allowed my luggage to fall into the river. When I ordered him to get it, I somehow found myself thrown into the river itself."

Dave stalked over to where they were standing. The man bristled.

"Are you implying I pushed you into the river?" The man looked as if he could strangle Ruth where she stood. Ruth pointed her nose a little higher in the air. "Well, I certainly didn't step into it, now did I? You purposely jostled the ferry so I would fall."

Lauren held her hands out. "Ruth. Ruthie. Please," she begged. "I am sorry you came all this way, but I am not leaving Last Chance. I am staying here."

Her sister looked shocked. "How could you want to stay here? This town is the most wretched, horrible, disgusting place I've ever seen."

Dave sneered. "And you're the most vulgar woman I've ever looked at."

Lauren gasped.

Ruth whitened with rage, but she deliberately turned her back on David and grabbed Lauren's hand, dragging her up the hill. "I can't let you stay here, Lauren. We'll get a hotel room so I can dry off and then make arrangements to go back home." She glanced over the crowd and her eyes landed on Christopher. Snapping her fingers, she exclaimed, "Excuse me. Yes, you... please grab my luggage and carry it to the nearest hotel." Ruth looked around at the buildings. "Preferably something that isn't above a saloon."

Lauren yanked her hand back. "That is not some luggage boy. This is my husband, Christopher Spaulding."

Ruth's eyes opened as if seeing him for the first time, then narrowed into thin slits. Lauren could see that the description of her sister was just sinking into Christopher's brain.

"Well, I can't let you stay here without my help again. I'll be here for the duration. Until you come to your senses and realized that marriage is not what you thought it was."

"That isn't going to happen, Ruth. Why don't you come home with us, and we can get you a warm bath and a hot meal?"

Ruth put her nose in the air. "No thank you. I'd rather stay in a hotel. When does the next stage leave to go back to wherever I came from?" she waved her hand in the air.

"Not soon enough," Dave murmured under his breath.

"Two weeks," another person piped up.

Ruth nodded, ignoring Dave's comment. "Two weeks. That gives me two weeks to convince you to come home with me. Although judging by the people here, that won't be very hard. Which way is the hotel?"

Christopher pointed down the road.

Ruth nodded and grabbed one end of her water-laden trunk and started dragging it in the direction Christopher pointed.

“Well,” Christopher said, looking at Lauren. “That was rather interesting.”

Lauren wrapped her arm around his side. “Let’s go home, husband. We need to find a way to keep her out of the house.”

Christopher laughed. “We can do anything together.”



## EPILOGUE



*Two years later...*

Lauren Spaulding walked along the river bank and watched the calm water flow downstream. There was a break in the grass and a dirt path led directly to the water's edge. She skipped down the dirt and crouched along the shore. She could see her image reflecting in the still water.

How things had changed since that fateful day that Christopher saved her life.

Dipping her fingers into the warm water she flicked it, distorting her image.

It was incredible that she felt safe being near the water once more.

It now held joy instead of fear.

Children splashed on the other side of the river. One spied her and raised his hand in a wave. Lauren waved back and laughed. Soon Esther would want to be swimming on the hot summer days. But not yet.

Esther was a precocious two-and-a-half-year-old. It took another three months before her colic ceased and Lauren could find enjoyment in her daughter again. Mrs. McCallister was a wonderful grandmother for the young girl, and Esther took delight in having the older woman wrapped around her little finger.

Along with caring for Esther, Mrs. McCallister took over most of the household chores. Yet, she never let Lauren completely become useless. Over time, Lauren learned how to cook simple dishes, and she still had to do some of the household work. It was something she wanted to do. She had no wish to be a cosseted wife.

Her sister's words from two years ago echoed in her brain. "Until you come to your senses and realize that marriage is not what you thought it was, you will regret living here."

Had her sister been right!

Marriage to Christopher had been different than life with Jonah. Christopher understood her limitations and made provisions for her. In return, she did the best she could to be a supportive wife to him. Over the past two years, the town of Last Chance had grown.

She learned everything she could from him and even went so far as

to help him with his work. More than once, she had come with him to help with a difficult birth or the loss of a pet. At those moments, she didn't care about the grime and the dirty places. She was there to help him.

Christopher was patient with her and kept his promise not to push her too quickly. Six months after they married, she allowed Christopher into her bed. By that time, she was in love with her husband irrevocably. How could she not have fallen in love with him?

He was good, kind, and so patient.

"Lauren!"

She turned to see Christopher coming toward her. She jumped to her feet. "Is everything okay? Is Esther all right?" Her heart thudded against her breastbone.

"She's fine. Mrs. McCallister is teaching her how to bake bread."

"Now? She's only two years old."

He shrugged. "Mrs. McCallister said it was good to train her to be a good wife now than later."

Lauren laughed, "Do you know? I think Esther will be a good one. She has so much of her father in here."

"I was worried about you. I saw you by the river."

"I'm fine. I was just remembering that day. And I'm so glad you were there for me."

Christopher took her in his arms. "I am, too."

They stood by the river, quiet and secure in their love for each other.

"I love you, Lauren Spaulding. I thank God for you every day."

"I love you, too. Thank you for loving me as I am."

He kissed her temple and they stood looking at the river that could have once been her coffin.

She lifted her face to the sun and allowed it to warm her skin. Closing her eyes, she said the words that were on her heart.

"Christopher, do you want to have a child with me?"

She felt him shudder against her, and then he turned her to face him. "Lauren, what you saying?"

"Would you like to have a child with me?"

His eyebrows lowered. "I thought you didn't want any more children."

"At the time, I didn't. I wasn't ready. But I am better than I was before. And I know every man wants children."

"I want you," he said, kissing her forehead. "You and only you."

“Well, you’ll be sharing me in a few months with another baby.”

Christopher looked down at her in shock. “I can’t tell you how happy I am. But we’ll get some more help for you.”

“Thank you, but maybe I’ll be a better mother to this child than I was to Esther.”

“You’re a wonderful mother. Don’t think any less of yourself.”

Together, they stood and watched the clear water pass by.

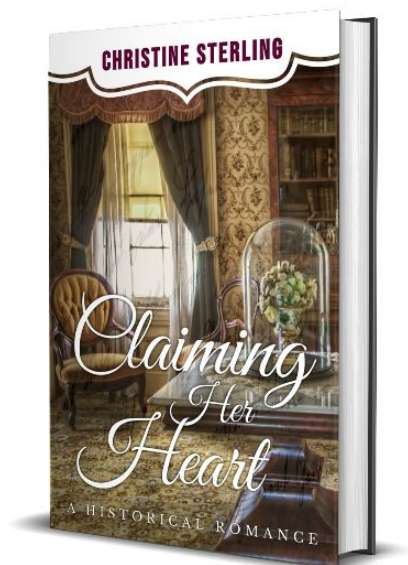
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## ABOUT CHRISTINE STERLING



Christine Sterling is an award-winning author and brainchild behind Chat, Sip, and Read -- Bringing Authors and Readers together over good food and great books. She has published over sixty-five books, mostly in the historical market, but is thrilled to move into contemporary romance.

She lives in Pennsylvania with her hero, a spoiled Shih Tzu, two German Shepherds, and an energetic Border Collie, that keep her on her toes. She spends her time writing, thinking about writing, and dreaming about writing. Her favorite things are a good cup of tea, puppy snuggles, a movie that will make you cry. and hearing from her readers.

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